

**Narrative Identities of Late Adolescent Males Who Experienced the Loss  
of a Parent**

by

**Frederik Schouwink**

**This thesis of limited scope is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements in**

**respect**

of the

**Doctor of Psychology with specialisation in Child Psychology**

in the

**Department of Psychology**

of the

**Faculty of the Humanities**

at the

**University of the Free State**

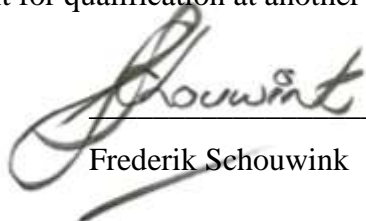
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**Supervisor: Prof Luzelle Naudé**

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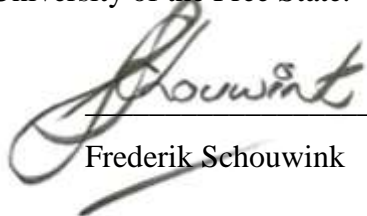
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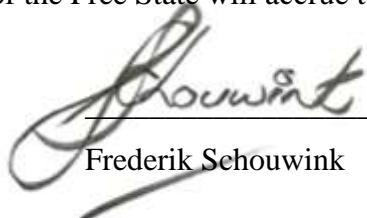
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## Permission to Submit



Reference: Prof L. Naudé  
Psychology Building, Room 111  
University of the Free State  
Bloemfontein  
9301

Telephone: 051 401 2189

Email: [naudel@ufs.ac.za](mailto:naudel@ufs.ac.za)

January 2023

### PERMISSION TO SUBMIT

**Student: Frederik Schouwink**

**Student number: 2015269109**

**Degree: Doctor of Psychology with specialisation in Child Psychology**

**Department: Psychology**

**Title: Narrative Identities of Late Adolescent Males Who Experienced the Loss of a Parent**

I hereby provide permission that this thesis of limited scope be submitted for examination - in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Doctor of Psychology with specialisation in Child Psychology in the Department of Psychology, Faculty of the Humanities, at the University of the Free State.

I approve the submission for assessment and that the submitted work has not previously, either in part or in its entirety, been submitted to the examiners or moderators.

Please see additional information attached.

Kind regards



**Prof L Naudé**  
**Supervisor**

---

Faculty of the Humanities | Department of Psychology  
T: +27 51 401 2187  
E: [psychinfo@ufs.ac.za](mailto:psychinfo@ufs.ac.za)  
205 Nelson Mandela Drive | Park West, Bloemfontein 9301 | South Africa  
P.O. Box 339 | Bloemfontein 9300 | South Africa | [www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za)



## Statement by Language Editor



30 ACTON AVENUE  
HELENA HEIGHTS  
SOMERSET WEST  
7130  
CELL: 082 8183277  
searle.edit@gmail.com

15 January 2023

To whom it may concern:

I, Lydia Searle, performed the copy edit for the thesis of Frederik Schouwink titled "Narrative Identities of Late Adolescent Males Who Experienced the Loss of a Parent".

Language, grammar, punctuation, and layout issues were addressed according to the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the APA Publication Manual. However, at the request of the supervisor and the student, the headings were numbered.

The reference list and the in-text citations were edited following the referencing style stipulated by the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the APA Publication Manual.

I am not accountable for any changes made to this document by the author or any other party subsequent to my edit.

Yours faithfully,  
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Member: Professional Editors' Guild RSA (PEG)

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## **Editorial Style**

This thesis employs the editorial style of the American Psychological Association (APA) as detailed in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th edition). However, the thesis uses British English spelling except when direct quotations are involved that use American English.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following significant influences in my life who have assisted me on my journey.

I want to thank my **supervisor, Professor Luzelle Naudé**, for her constant guidance and patience during my doctoral journey. Your breadth of knowledge and attention to detail is astonishing.

I would like to thank **all the adolescents** who took part in the interviews. Their courage, honesty, and willingness to talk about their lived experiences made this study possible.

Thank you **Lydia Searle** and **Carmen Nel** for your technical advice and editing.

I thank my mother, **Letitia Schouwink**, for always believing in me and motivating, supporting, and loving me along the way.

To my **friend and colleague, Dr Daniela Pitt**: Thank you for being a strong and supportive friend and mentor throughout my journey. Also, thank you **Dr Elzette Fritz**. You have inspired me with your incredible resilience in times of trauma and loss. Your redemptive life story is a guiding light for us all.

Last but not least, I want to extend my gratitude to **Shamman Deeplaul**, my best friend and life partner who has been instrumental in making my dreams come true. I could not have persevered in this journey without you by my side. I am grateful for the love and support you have shown me and for your belief in me.

## **Dedication**

Dedicated to my late father, **Johan Gerrit Schouwink**, who initiated this personal journey

when he passed away on 20 June 2019.

Our continued bond inspired and strengthened me to keep going.

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## Summary

Many children in South Africa have lost a parent through various causes, including HIV/AIDS. In 2021 alone, a staggering 2 920 000 children were affected, with 960 000 young people losing a parent to this disease. Additionally, South Africa recorded the highest number of children who lost their primary caregiver to COVID-19 between March 2020 and April 2021. The death of a parent can be a significant turning point in a young person's life, altering the construction of their narrative identity. Hence, this qualitative study aimed to explore and describe the emerging narrative identities of late adolescent males who had lost a parent between birth and 14 years of age. The current study explored these narratives around parental loss and the subsequent bereavement stressors using the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement and the Continuing Bonds Model. Furthermore, the study aimed to understand the meaning that the late adolescents ascribed to the loss using the Meaning Reconstruction Theory. In addition, the Gender Role Strain Paradigm was used to explore how the narrative identities and meaning-making processes of late adolescent males have been shaped by gender roles. Being positioned within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, this qualitative study was interested in the meaning of individual participants' experiences. Using a narrative research design, the study specifically focused on turning points or significant events in the participants' lives. The participants were late adolescent males between the ages of 15 years and 19 years who had lost a parent between birth and 14 years of age. In this study, data were collected through a semi-structured interview using the Life Story Interview method (Atkinson & Hagenah, 1994), and subsequently analysed using thematic narrative analysis. The results suggested that parental loss brought about significant personal changes, secondary losses, and particular challenges as participants came to terms with their grief. Specifically, the grieving process reflected how grief occurs throughout the developmental years. Furthermore, participants' views signified how

gender-related changes in society have affected how male loss is expressed. The participants' views on gender roles indicated significant changes in how society perceives traditional gender roles. The role of significant others was also highlighted as a salient theme and suggests that the surviving parent, extended family, teachers, and peers play a pivotal role in the grief process. Finding meaning in the loss was considered and how participants were engaged in the meaning-making process was demonstrated. The importance of agency and goal-directedness was central in the narratives of parentally bereaved late adolescent males. Lastly, the value of telling the story of loss was also highlighted. This study contributed to the limited research that has been conducted on narrative identity and parental loss. Furthermore, the unique focus on late adolescents who have experienced parental loss using a narrative inquiry approach highlights potential areas of intervention for this population.

*Keywords:* narrative identity, life story, late adolescence, parental loss, bereavement, grief, meaning reconstruction, Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement, continuing bonds, Gender Role Strain Paradigm, masculinity

When a tree is struck by lightning,

If it survives, its growth is altered.

A knot may form where the lightning hit.

The growth on one side of the tree  
may be more vigorous than on another side.

The shape of the tree may change.

An interesting twist or a curious split  
has replaced what might have otherwise

been a straight line.

The tree flourishes; it bears fruit, provides shade,  
becomes a home to birds and squirrels.

It is not the same tree it would have been  
If there had not been a lightning storm.

Maxine Harris in *The Loss that is Forever*

## Reflexive Stance

*“... learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship [sic] is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you ... work.”*

Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*.

Reflexivity is a fundamental element of qualitative research that allows researchers to reflect critically on their positionality and role in shaping research outcomes. Reflexive stance involves acknowledging and reflecting on how the researcher's experiences, biases, and assumptions may have influenced the research process and findings. This helps researchers to identify and minimise the influence of their own perspectives and values on research outcomes, leading to more rigorous and valid research (Finlay & Gough, 2008).

As the primary researcher in this study, I incorporated my own reflexive stance at the outset of this thesis, drawing upon my own experiences and perceptions to examine critically the research process and findings while recognising the importance of reflexive practice in ensuring the integrity and validity of the research outcomes. In this regard, I position myself as a white, Afrikaans/English, middle-class, cisgender, gay, non-disabled, and non-religious male. I was born in 1978, which means that my formative years were during the last years of the apartheid system of racial segregation and discrimination. I have lived in the Gauteng province all my life and have spent most of my adult life in upper-middle class areas. By all accounts, I have been privileged in many respects.

My father was born in the Netherlands, but my grandparents immigrated to South Africa in the 1950s. My mother was born in South Africa. Both my parents had formal schooling, with my dad receiving technical training. My mother left school in Standard 6 (now Grade 8) and held a few informal jobs until she met my father and married. My mother

was predominantly responsible for raising me in my early years, with my father being the breadwinner. Reflecting on my formative years, I am grateful to have had a supportive, consistent, intact, upper-middle-class family who supported my development. Coming from a liberal family context in contrast with many of my peers, I was also privileged to have the freedom to explore my own identity and belief systems.

I am an only child and was the first in my family to receive formal university training up to master's level. I have an innate love for learning and knowledge, and much of my identity is embedded in the values of personal and professional growth and helping others. As a qualified educator and educational psychologist, I have worked in both governmental and private contexts. Currently, I am working in a private practice and a private school where most adolescent learners have ample access to resources. A high premium is placed on academic achievement and success in addition to family involvement, and this has influenced my experience and worldview of working with young people.

I have had little exposure to traumatic life events throughout most of my life except for bullying in my schooling years. In the context of this study, my first experience of death was at the age of seven years. My paternal grandfather died, and for many years, I was haunted by the memory of the funeral and subsequently developed a fear of ghosts. However, as a child, I was nevertheless fascinated with the idea of what death and the possible afterlife meant. Many years later, as an adolescent, my other grandparents passed away, which was difficult but much easier to handle. Two significant losses, however, stand out as being profound turning points in my life story: the suicide of my best friend and the death of my father in 2019.

In my personal and professional life, I understand the immense trauma that death can have on a person's mental health and well-being. Although it is a common life experience, it does not seem that people want to or are able to talk about the experience of dealing with

primary and secondary losses in the aftermath of losing a loved one. At the time of conducting this research, I imagined that the death of a parent for a young person must be a significant disruptive event that could potentially change their whole life narrative.

As a qualitative researcher, I bring many different lenses to understanding the experience of parental loss among late adolescent males. Considering my personality, I am naturally more attuned to the emotional and relational aspects of people's stories. Moreover, being a psychologist, I framed much of the participants' stories through a trauma-developmental lens. In listening to the participants' stories, I was also sensitive to their experiences of being excluded, feeling different, and struggling with peer relationships. As a qualitative researcher, I also had to keep myself in check while conducting the study. While my personal experiences and professional background allowed me to connect with the participants and understand their experiences better, I also had to ensure that my biases and assumptions did not interfere with the data collection and analysis. I continuously reflected on my positionality and engaged in critical self-reflection to ensure that I remained open and receptive to the participants' perspectives and experiences, rather than imposing my own views on the data. Thus, throughout the study, I applied a reflexive position in order to appreciate how my background informed my understanding of the themes that emerged from the participants' stories.

## Chapter 1: Overview of the Research

*“Narrative identity is constructed through connections between past, present, and future, and bereaved individuals may experience a major break in life-story continuity because their close other can no longer be a part of their future life. Thus, the task that bereaved individuals face is to let go of an anticipated future life story that their close other was a part of and construct a new and meaningful future.”*

(Thomsen et al., 2018, p. 2)

As illustrated in the quotation above, losing a parent can profoundly influence a young person’s development and is most likely to feature in their life story as a significant life event. Moreover, the grief that follows parental loss fluctuates through an extended developmental process across the lifespan, resulting in a wide array of developmental outcomes. In particular, the grieving process for males may be informed by gender norms, which may further influence how they psychologically adjust to their loss and construct their life story, also known as their narrative identity. In turn, their narrative identity will influence how they make sense of their past, present, and future selves, which has consequences for their psychological adjustment and mental health.

Chapter 1 provides the context and rationale for the study. A description of the research aims and questions follows. In addition, central concepts related to this inquiry, including ‘loss’, ‘late adolescence’, and ‘narrative identity’, are defined and explained. Thereafter, the chapter introduces the methodological paradigm and the choices that informed the study. Lastly, the ethical implications of the study are considered, and the remainder of the thesis is outlined.

## 1.1 Context of the Study

The focus on child and adolescent grief and parental loss in this South African study is timely considering how many children in South Africa have lost a parent since the COVID-19 pandemic. An astonishing 2 920 000 South African children lost one or both parents in 2021. For 960 000 of these children, HIV/AIDS caused the death of one or both parents (UNICEF, 2022). Another study found that 14% (2 758 000) of the 19.7 million South African children and adolescents had lost either their mother or father or both parents (Shung-King et al., 2019). Moreover, according to Hillis et al. (2021), South Africa demonstrated the world's highest number of children (94 625) who lost their primary caregiver due to COVID-19 between March 2020 and April 2021. Many of these children were raised by single parents, which placed these young people at considerable risk of being orphaned. Considering the many parentally bereaved young people in South Africa, more in-depth research on childhood grief and its impact on lifespan developmental outcomes is needed.

One of the most distressing forms of adversity for young people is the loss of a parent (Cerniglia et al., 2014; Li, Vestergaard et al., 2014; Wardecker et al., 2017). However, not all young people experience adverse outcomes. Researchers have shifted from examining negative psychological outcomes to exploring positive psychological outcomes after a parent dies (Asgari & Naghavi, 2020; Greene & McGovern, 2017; Şimşek et al., 2022). In the aftermath of parental loss, a young person's way of telling their life story, or what is known as their narrative identity, may play an essential role in determining their psychological outcomes, be they positive or negative.

Adler et al. (2015) state, "A rich array of perspectives supports the notion that individuals' stories about their lives ought to be understood as core elements of personality and should be associated with and predict important outcomes such as well-being" (p. 141). Similarly, McAdams (2001) states that by constructing their narrative identities, individuals

integrate their life experiences into an internalised, evolving story of themselves. By doing so, they can make sense of their past, present, and future. They also use their narrative identity to guide their understanding of themselves, their goals, and their actions (Baddeley & Singer, 2010; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Thomsen et al., 2018). Therefore, constructing a narrative identity in the face of parental loss has psychological significance for the young person.

Individuals tend to include memories in their life stories based on their relevance and their distinctive, highly emotional, and influential nature; these memories often have themes of death or relationship issues (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Singer, 2004). Hence, the loss of a parent may be an emotional and significant turning point in someone's life. It may alter a young person's life story and narrative identity (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Neimeyer, 2005).

How adolescents construct their life stories can provide insight into how they give meaning to their memories of loss. Young people tell their life stories differently (i.e., they reflect different narrative forms or themes) (McAdams et al., 2001) compared with other developmental stages and among themselves. McAdams et al. (2001) suggest that each individual's life story is unique and may vary due to differences in experiences, personalities, and cultural backgrounds. This highlights the importance of recognising the diversity of narrative forms and themes that exist within the population of young people compared with other developmental stages and among themselves. A host of individual characteristics, developmental factors, and systemic influences will shape an adolescent's narrative.

Furthermore, adolescents' narratives may be shaped by the stressors relating to their loss. For example, stressors associated with grief, as described by the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010), can be divided into two categories. First, loss-orientated stressors are caused by grief-related feelings (e.g., sadness, irritability, and yearning). Second, restoration-orientated stressors relate to adjusting to the

loss (e.g., moving forward after the loss, learning new skills, and forming a new identity). Alternating between these two stressors can help adolescents cope with their loss (Lundberg et al., 2018; Supiano, 2019). According to Lundberg et al. (2018) and Supiano (2019), alternating between stressors related to the loss (e.g., engaging in grief work or reminiscing about the deceased) and stressors unrelated to the loss (e.g., participating in social or recreational activities) can help adolescents cope with their loss. This alternating process can provide a sense of balance and control and help adolescents manage their emotions and maintain a sense of connection with the world around them. Thus, by alternating between these stressors, adolescents can engage in an adaptive coping process that facilitates their adjustment to the loss. By adjusting to their loss, they may even form a different psychological relationship with their deceased parent, as proposed by the Continuing Bonds Model (Klass, 2015; Klass et al., 1996). The Continuing Bonds Model proposes that the death of a loved one does not necessarily mean the end of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. Instead, individuals may develop a new type of relationship with the deceased that is characterised by ongoing bonds, continuing communication, and the incorporation of the deceased into the individual's life story (Klass et al., 1996). This model suggests that individuals can adapt to loss in a way that allows them to maintain a sense of connection with the deceased and find meaning in the ongoing relationship.

Cultural narratives may facilitate or hinder the oscillation between loss and restoration stressors (Wortman & Liu, 2011). The way in which a culture views grief and coping can affect the ability of bereaved individuals to navigate their loss and restoration stressors (Doka, 2016). Within a typical patriarchal society such as South Africa, certain dominant forms of masculinity, also known as hegemonic masculinity, encourage emotional restraint (Everitt-Penhale & Ratele, 2015; Ratele, 2014). These dominant masculine ideals may make it difficult for adolescent males to express sadness, to shed tears, and to indicate vulnerability

associated with loss-orientated stressors (Creighton et al., 2013). Although some adolescent males adapt to loss by avoiding negative emotions, others may be hindered by the inability to express loss-related feelings (Baddeley & Singer, 2010). This difficulty in expressing their feelings may have adverse psychological outcomes. Based on the limited research on the topic within the South African context, it remains unclear how adolescent males narrate the story of parental loss in their overall life story and how they derive meaning out of this life-altering event. Furthermore, the role played by the masculine ideals of emotional restraint, rationality, and indifference in the grief process is unclear.

The current study aimed to bridge the gap between the theoretical research on bereavement and the practical applications for psychologists working with bereaved adolescents. By exploring the life stories and narrative identities of late adolescent males who have experienced early parental loss, the study sought to provide a deeper understanding of the grieving process in this population. This, in turn, can inform the development of effective interventions for psychologists who work with bereaved youth and facilitate the construction of a coherent and stable identity for young people who have lost a parent. Therefore, the current study has the potential to narrow the gap between what researchers contribute to theoretical knowledge and what practitioners practically apply in their work with bereaved adolescents.

Research on grief with a specific focus on storytelling and meaning-making is most suitable to achieve this aim, lending itself to a constructivist perspective (Neimeyer, 1999, 2005, 2019; Neimeyer et al., 2014). In the context of grief research, a constructivist perspective recognises that people's experiences of loss and grief are shaped by a variety of personal and social factors and that people actively engage in the process of making sense of their loss and finding meaning in it. This often involves telling and retelling their stories of the deceased and their relationship with them and reflecting on the impact of the loss on their

lives (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010). A constructivist perspective therefore goes beyond the traditional grief theories that have historically simplified the grieving process to stages, phases, and tasks. Neimeyer (1999) states, “the intimate details of peoples’ stories of loss suggest a complex process of adaptation to a changed reality, a process that is at the same time immensely personal, intricately relational, and inevitably cultural” (p. 66). Because of this, the current study clarifies parental loss in early childhood and the in-depth stories of bereaved adolescent males. The study also provides qualitative insight into how parental loss in early childhood may shape the identities and life stories of these late adolescent males as they develop a sense of meaning and purpose.

## **1.2 Research Aim and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to document the emerging narrative identities of late adolescent males who had lost a parent earlier in their lives. The study explored their narratives around the loss, the subsequent bereavement stressors, and the meaning that they may have ascribed to the loss. The focus was also on understanding how gender roles have shaped the narrative identities and meaning-making processes of these late adolescent males. Consequently, the primary research questions were as follows:

- How do late adolescent males construct and narrate their experience of parental loss?
- How do late adolescent males experience the bereavement process, oscillating between loss-orientated and restoration-orientated stressors?
- What narrative themes and subsequent meaning-making emerges from the life stories of late adolescent males?
- How have gender-informed norms shaped the narrative identities of late adolescent males following the loss of a parent?

This research was conducted to achieve specific aims. First, the study aimed to identify the recurring patterns, topics, or ideas—referred to as thematic elements—that emerge from the life stories of late adolescent males as they share their experiences. In addition to identifying thematic elements, the degree to which a coherent narrative resolution was present in the recounting of their life stories was also considered. Coherent narrative resolution is characterised by a life story with some sense of closure and a comforting outcome (Lilgendahl et al., 2018; Pals, 2006).

Through the research process, the participants were able to contemplate how they had navigated their bereavement and to express their journey of finding new meaning in life after losing a parent. Narrating one's life story to another can lead to greater meaning-making and maturity (Reese et al., 2020). Beyond the mere collection of data, the study enabled participants to benefit from sharing their life stories. More details regarding the design is presented later in this chapter and in Chapter 4. A conceptual clarification of the central concepts used in this study is offered below.

### **1.3 Definitions of Central Concepts**

Definitions of the key concepts are essential to the comprehension of this research. Therefore, before proceeding with the study, explanations of the fundamental concepts that were used are provided, thus establishing a clear understanding of their meanings and significance.

#### **1.3.1 Loss**

Loss can be defined as the state of no longer having something (Oxford University Press, n.d.). When thinking about loss, the experience of losing someone to physical death often comes to mind. However, loss can also refer to a non-death loss, which entails a grieving process over a loss that people encounter in everyday life (Harris, 2019). In terms of loss, grief is the emotional distress experienced after a significant loss, usually the death of a

loved one, and this may or may not be expressed to others (American Psychological Association [APA], 2016). This study focuses on adolescent males who have lost a parent to physical death. Numerous circumstances can lead to physical death (i.e., sudden, traumatic, or anticipated death). These concepts are discussed in detail in Chapter 2, focusing on how the manner of death may affect children and adolescents.

### ***1.3.2 Parent***

Defining the concept of ‘parent’ is more complex than one may initially assume. In South Africa, responsibility and care for a child are by no means synonymous with biological parenthood, considering the emergence of many ‘social families’. These social families refer to family units in which children are brought up wholly or partially by individuals who are not the children’s biological or legal parents. These may include relatives such as grandparents and persons who are unrelated to the child (Boniface, 2007). Many older people, usually older women, take full responsibility for raising their grandchildren (Boon et al., 2010).

Although the term ‘parent’ may refer to biological parents, it could also signify any significant person(s) who plays a parental role and provides care. The Revised White Paper of Families (2021) provides a meaningful definition of caregiving. The document states the following:

This process includes ‘caring about’ which refers to paying attention to feelings of affection and concern about another, ‘caring for’ which refers to taking responsibility for the well-being of another, and ‘caregiving’ which refers to the competent engagement in physical care work such as feeding or washing. Caregiving in this document refers to all three of these aspects of care. (p. 180)

Although the death of a first-degree relative such as a parent, sibling, or child can have a significant impact on a young person, it is also important to recognise that the death of

someone who fulfils a parental role—even if not a first-degree relative—can also have a profound effect on them (Akerman & Statham, 2011). The current study refers to a parent as someone who meets a child's or adolescent's daily psychological and physical needs.

### ***1.3.3 Meaning-Making***

Meaning-making can be defined as the degree to which a person learns something or gleans a message from an event (McAdams, 2015). Neimeyer (2019) extends this definition within the context of loss by referring to meaning-making as the process through which a bereaved individual makes sense of loss, finds benefits from the loss, and reclaims their identity. Neimeyer (2019) continues that individuals have an innate drive to understand, predict and, to some extent, influence events that make up their lives (i.e., give meaning to them). However, unexpected and traumatic events such as parental death can shatter a person's assumptions about the world. Hence, in the aftermath of loss, individuals must reconstruct meaning. In other words, they must find some explanation and reason for the incomprehensible loss. Neimeyer (2021) emphatically states that the reasons attributed to the loss (i.e., the meaning assigned to the loss) are sometimes negative. However, bereaved individuals can find positive meaning in obtaining a sense of spiritual, existential, and personal benefit from their loss.

### ***1.3.4 Narrative Identity***

McAdams and McLean (2013) define narrative identity as “a person's internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose” (p. 233). In the story, the autobiographical past is retold and the future is anticipated, revealing how the character became who they are and where their lives may lead (McAdams, 2011). Narrative identities continue to evolve and develop throughout one's life, but research suggests that they tend to become more complex and coherent during late adolescence and young adulthood (McAdams & Pals, 2006). This is a time when

individuals are actively exploring and constructing their sense of self and place in the world, often through the creation of more elaborate and integrated personal narratives. The narratives that people encounter in their social lives serve as sources of images, metaphors, and themes for defining their own life stories (Fivush, 2019; McAdams, 2001).

### ***1.3.5 Late Adolescence***

Although various definitions of late adolescence exist, for the current study, late adolescence is defined as the developmental stage between 15 years and 19 years (Baker et al., 2015; Irwin et al., 2002; McAdams, 2015). Although young people can narrate their life stories from an early age, they begin to tell the story more coherently during late adolescence. Not only is the story told more cohesively but also, during late adolescence, they ascribe meaning to past events with greater intention (Banks, 2013; McLean, 2005). As adolescents engage in novel experiences, they select, organise, and interpret specific significant experiences by making sense of them (Krok, 2018). Furthermore, Singer (2004) states that the meaning-making process of the late adolescent “was most linked to memories that expressed some form of tension or conflict, particularly those memories that displayed themes of mortality or relationship” (p. 449). Hence, this age group is most suitable for this study. For clarity, in this study, ‘children’ refers to persons under 14 years of age.

## **1.4 Overview of the Research Paradigm, Design, and Methods**

Researchers use various paradigms to guide their research activities and methods to answer their research questions. Ontology, epistemology, and methods of acquiring knowledge are all elements of research paradigms (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tuli, 2010). An interpretivist-constructivist paradigm informed this study. This research paradigm is positioned in the understanding that individuals construct meaning out of their experiences. An interpretivist-constructivist paradigm also holds that the human mind creates rather than discovers knowledge and truth (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Hence, the subjective

meaning of an individual's experience is central (Bryman, 2012). Researchers who follow an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm typically use a qualitative approach to understand how people interpret their experiences.

The current qualitative study used an inquiry-based narrative research design (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin, 2019; Josselson, 2007; Riessman, 2005, 2008). It involves the analysis of a small number of individuals, collecting data through stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing them (Kim, 2016). Narrative research is best suited in situations where detailed stories facilitate understanding. As an overarching category, narrative research encompasses a variety of research practices. In such a study, an account of a person's life experiences as a life history is presented (Spector-Mersel, 2010). The focus is usually on the turning points or significant events in a person's life (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Kim, 2016).

The population of interest in the current study that could provide in-depth and rich narratives was late adolescent males who had experienced parental loss. Therefore, in order to conduct purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020), registered psychologists in independent practice in the Gauteng, South Africa area were contacted. They were informed of the study and were invited to advise potential participants and their legal guardians about the opportunity to participate. Participants were screened according to their age (15–19 years old), gender (self-identified males) and experience (loss of a parent between birth and 14 years old).

Since narrative inquiry involves storytelling, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the primary data source. Interviews with a semi-structured format are typically preferred when discussing sensitive topics such as loss and bereavement (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews are often preferred in research on sensitive topics such as loss and bereavement because they allow for flexibility and depth in data collection while maintaining a consistent framework (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Seidman, 2006). This approach can help to

elicit rich and nuanced data from participants and build rapport between the interviewer and the participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). A reflective journal was also used to write interpretive stories. Reflections on each narrative were summarised, highlighting their essential themes.

To analyse narrative interview data, researchers must select a method that describes the core of the participants' experiences. Data analysis must also maintain the meaning of the data while making it accessible (Dibley, 2011). Riessman's thematic narrative analysis was the most suitable (Riessman, 2005; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). Unlike other types of narrative analysis, a thematic narrative analysis focuses on the patterns of meaning in the narratives. While Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that a reflexive approach can be applied to thematic analysis, it is important to note that they also differentiate between reflexive thematic analysis and other forms of thematic analysis. In this approach, the researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity are considered important analytical resources.

The thematic approach consisted of broad phases (Butina, 2015). The first phase of organising and preparing the data began with repeated readings while making sense of the data. In the transcript margins, themes and patterns were actively created through interpretative engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In addition to summarising the data, associations, connections, and preliminary interpretations were made with repeated readings. Next, the themes in individual narratives were further analysed, allowing broad salient themes evident across cases to be constructed. The salient themes represented the significant findings of this study. Lastly, the data were interpreted to determine their meaning.

There are various ways to ensure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Finlay, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010). In this regard, the interviews were listened to repeatedly and the transcripts were re-read. Participants were also

encouraged to be as detailed as possible during the interviews. It was made clear to the participants that their participation was voluntary, and this gave integrity to the study.

Additionally, using reflexivity, the researcher focused on the context of knowledge construction (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Every stage of the research process was examined to determine how the researcher's motivation, assumptions, and preconceptions had informed the results (Brennan & Letherby, 2017; Visser, 2017). Throughout the research process, the researcher reflected on his biases. Although qualitative findings cannot be generalised to different contexts, the necessary contextual information relating to the participants was provided; the research process was described in detail should other researchers wish to repeat the study. The thematic narrative analysis was presented as poignantly, evocatively, touchingly, and vividly as possible.

### **1.5 Ethical Implications of the Study**

This research project was informed and conducted according to the ethical measures and guidelines stipulated by the General Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State, the South African Constitution, and other relevant legislation and guidelines. These guidelines served as standards for evaluating the researcher's conduct.

Registered educational psychologists informed potential participants and their legal guardians about the research and obtained written permission for the primary researcher of the current study to contact them. Thereafter, participants and their caregivers were provided with additional detailed information and were requested to give their informed assent/consent. The participants were advised that no penalties or consequences would be imposed if they not wish to participate, and no rewards would be granted to anyone who decided to take part.

Every precaution was taken to ensure the confidentiality of the research participants. Since pseudonyms were used, each participant was assured that their name would not be

directly associated with information obtained from the research project. Moreover, all records and research will be kept in safekeeping for five years. Furthermore, the researcher was responsible for conducting research ethically and referring participants for further counselling if necessary. After completing the study, the participants were furnished with a written summary in an article format.

### **1.6 Delineation of the Chapters**

The study's background and context are described in Chapter 1, and the purpose, aims and are outlined. In addition, the concepts and assumptions that were used in this study are explained. After a brief discussion of the research paradigm and design, the research methodology and data analysis techniques are discussed. The chapter concludes by discussing trustworthiness and ethics.

Chapter 2 presents a detailed discussion of the relevant literature. Specifically, the literature clarifies the experience of child and adolescent grief due to the loss of a parent. The nature of loss is explored, focusing on how certain deaths may affect children. Developmental and contextual factors are outlined, and contemporary grief theories are discussed in this chapter. The discussion also considers various factors that influence a young person's reaction to parental loss, including the role of gender.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on narrative identity construction and meaning-making in the face of loss. This chapter summarises key constructs and research findings to help better understand McAdams's theory on narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013), the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2008), Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction Model (Neimeyer, 2019), and the theory on Continuing Bonds (Klass, 1996). A summary of the research relating to the topic concludes the chapter by integrating the main theoretical underpinnings.

In Chapter 4, the study's research design and methodology are detailed. The discussion focuses on the research paradigm that was adopted. The chapter also explains why specific data collection methods were chosen, how the data were analysed, and how they were interpreted. Specific attention is given to narrative inquiry as a research design. Recruitment, sampling, and the participants are also explained. The study is assessed against the university's ethical requirements and the ethical considerations of qualitative research concerning the trustworthiness and credibility of the research process.

Chapter 5 documents the research findings by detailing the narratives of the individual participants. Initial background information about each participant is provided. This is followed by discussing each participant's life story and the themes identified in their narrative. Verbatim quotations from each participant's interview are used to present the results. This is followed by a discussion of the general thematic content, emphasising the salient themes that were observed among the participants in the study.

Chapter 6 provides a theoretical discussion, elaborating on the themes and subsequent findings from the research by referencing the relevant theories presented in chapters 2 and 3. The results are interpreted according to the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement, the Continuing Bonds Model, the Meaning Reconstruction Theory, and the Gender Role Strain Paradigm. The discussion aimed to elucidate the salient themes that can be discerned in the narrative identities of parentally bereaved late adolescent males.

To conclude, Chapter 7 summarises and integrates the theoretical underpinnings with the themes outlined in Chapter 5, unifying the entire research study. A consideration of the study's unique contribution in addition to its limitations and its strengths is included in this study. Several recommendations are also made regarding future research that could be conducted.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

Adolescents narrate their life stories by focusing on particular events such as parental loss because they need to understand the experiences that shape their narrative identities. Their narrative identities will profoundly shape their psychological lives. Using a narrative inquiry, this qualitative study focuses on how late adolescent males construct a narrative about parental loss. At the same time, the study is mindful that culture may shape the grief experiences of late adolescent males, with subsequent effects on their well-being. More insight into the unexplored phenomenon of parental loss and narrative identity construction is provided below.

In this chapter, the research study was introduced and readers were orientated towards the remainder of the thesis. The value of the study can be appreciated, particularly considering the limited research that is available on the subject. A review of the existing literature follows, and this serves as a theoretical framework for the subsequent two chapters. The literature review helps to contextualise the research and identify gaps in the current understanding of the topic.

## Chapter 2: Parental Loss

*“The death of a loved one ... can undermine the basic storyline of our lives, launching an anguished attempt to make sense of what we have suffered and who we are in its wake.”*

(Neimeyer & Thompson, 2019, p. 4)

A young person’s grief that is associated with parental loss is never entirely resolved. People’s grieving often becomes the central context in which their development and life story unfolds (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011; Feigelman et al., 2017; Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). This chapter reviews the literature on parental loss as a significant life event. Many factors influence how a child experiences parental loss. To grasp this better, one must understand the nature of grief from a developmental perspective in addition to how a child perceives and reacts to loss and how it affects their development.

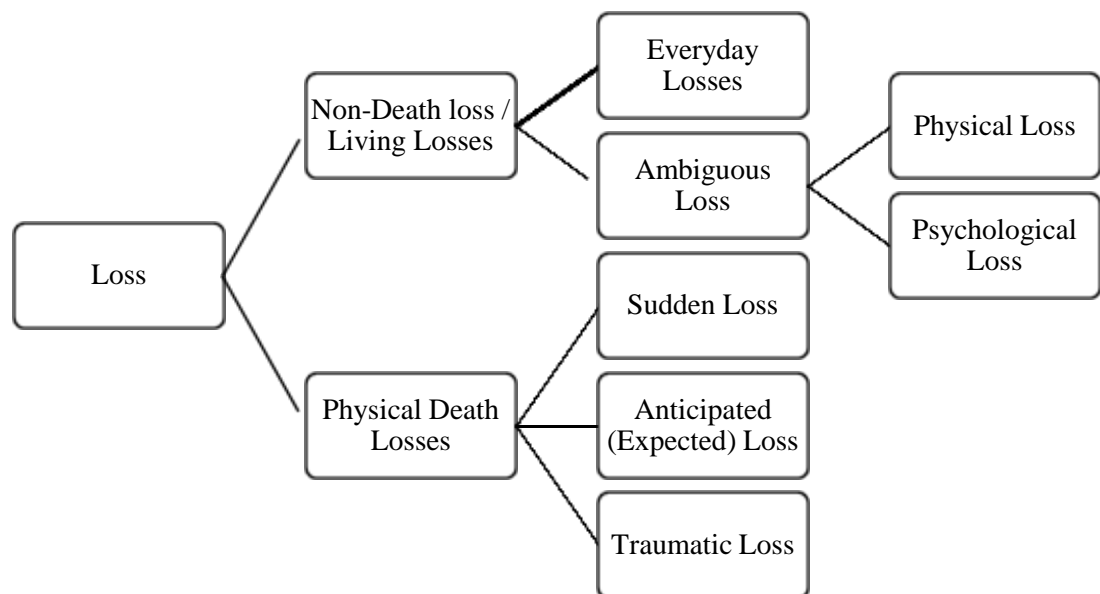
The circumstances under which a child can lose a parent directly shape a child’s grief experience, and these are initially considered in this chapter. The discussion focuses on how children understand and experience loss from a developmental perspective. Specifically, how a child’s perception of death shifts across the developmental lifespan is investigated. Following this, the discussion focuses on grief reactions across the lifespan and the developmental outcomes of loss in young people. Thereafter, three specific theoretical models proposed to understand these grief reactions better are provided. This study is primarily informed by the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010), the Meaning Reconstruction Model (Neimeyer, 2019) and the Continuing Bonds Model (Klass et al., 1996). In conclusion, a discussion on the individual, the family, and the cultural factors influencing a child’s response to parental loss is provided.

## 2.1 The Nature of Loss

Research in death studies is prolific and has provided significant insights and perspectives into the human experience of death, dying, loss, and grief. Loss may seem obvious, but the concept holds multiple meanings. Harris (2019) defines a loss as “an experience where there is a change in circumstance, perception, or experience where it would be impossible to return to the way things were before” (p. 2). Figure 1 below illustrates the different types of losses that are linked with this definition.

**Figure 1**

*Different Types of Losses*



When thinking about loss, the experience of losing someone to physical death often comes to mind. However, as Harris’ (2019) abovementioned definition implies, the loss can also refer to non-death losses. Non-death losses, or what is also referred to as living losses, often go unrecognised, for example, having family and friends immigrate, having a loved one incarcerated, or accepting a parent’s terminal illness (Harris, 2019; Smith & Delgado, 2020).

Ambiguous loss is the type of loss that is characterised by a lack of closure and a sense of uncertainty or ambiguity about the presence, absence, or status of a person, object, or situation. This type of loss is often experienced when the person's physical or psychological presence is diminished or uncertain such as in cases of missing persons, chronic illness, dementia, or immigration. Examples of ambiguous loss include a parent who has disappeared in a natural disaster or a parent who is physically alive but in a state of cognitive decline. Unlike clear-cut losses such as death or divorce, ambiguous loss does not provide emotional closure or clarity of understanding and may result in ongoing grief, confusion, or conflict for those affected (Boss et al., 2016). This type of loss leaves a family searching for answers, complicating and delaying the grieving process and leading to unresolved grief. The family often deals with uncertainty and unknown details (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Guidry et al., 2013). Boss et al. (2016) differentiate between two forms of ambiguous loss. First, ambiguous physical loss refers to a loved one being physically gone without knowing if the person is still alive (e.g., missing person). In these circumstances, the bereaved family does not have closure and often hopes that either the person will return or someone will find their body. Secondly, ambiguous psychological loss refers to scenarios where the parent is still physically present but is psychologically absent, for example, where a parent has sustained a brain injury and can no longer communicate with their loved ones. Few studies have been conducted to understand ambiguous loss and meaning-making from children's perspectives. However, a study by Huang and Habermas (2021) indicates that ambiguous loss makes meaning-making and coherently narrating loss more challenging for adults.

Physical death is often the most common association with loss. In this case the person's body and brain physically cease to function (DeGrazia, 2014). The current study focuses specifically on losing a parent through physical death. There are different ways in which a person (hereafter referred to as the 'parent') may die, which results in different grief

experiences for young persons. In the literature, three broad types of physical death losses are identified: sudden, anticipatory (or expected), and traumatic loss (see Figure 1).

Sudden death refers to a parent dying without forewarning (Pham et al., 2018). Melhem et al. (2011) demonstrated that more than half of the children aged 7–18 years who suddenly lost a parent had a decrease in grief reactions within the first year of the loss. Most children, therefore, seem to cope well after suddenly losing a parent. Nevertheless, the same research indicated that about 10% of children had complicated grief reactions that were intense and prolonged (Melhem et al., 2011).

Melhem et al. (2008) argue that parents who suddenly die are more inclined to have had mental health challenges. Several psychological disorders, including mood, substance abuse, and personality disorders are linked to an increased risk of mortality. Reasons for these premature deaths include suicide, accidents, and other physical illnesses such as heart disease. Melhem et al. (2008, 2011) suggest that children who experience the loss of a loved one in a family with existing mental health concerns may be at a higher risk of developing psychological problems after the bereavement. These problems could include symptoms of anxiety, depression, or other emotional and behavioural difficulties. This means that the child's grief may be further complicated by their pre-existing family circumstances. The presence of mental health concerns in the family may also affect the child's ability to cope with the loss and may make it more difficult for them to access appropriate support and resources. Ultimately, this can make the grieving process even more challenging and complex for the child.

An anticipated, expected or pre-loss often triggers grief before death occurs and usually results from a loved one struggling with a prolonged medical illness (Carr, 2012; Ferow, 2019). Anticipated loss is not necessarily less traumatic for a child. Indeed, a child may experience intrusive memories, thoughts, and feelings, irrespective of their parent's

death (Bergman et al., 2017). Children aged 3–12 years who lost a parent due to prolonged illness rather than due to a sudden, natural death were found to have post-traumatic stress and complicated grief (Kaplow et al., 2014).

In contrast, traumatic loss is the result of a sudden death caused by external situations such as an accident, murder, or suicide (Scott et al., 2020). Researchers have found contradicting evidence regarding the impact of traumatic loss on individuals. For example, some researchers indicate that traumatic loss can have more harmful psychological effects than loss through natural causes (Rostila et al., 2016). Høeg et al. (2018) argue that experiences such as losing a parent through suicide differ qualitatively from experiences of other losses. For example, young grievors are inclined to ask why the parent chose suicide and who is to blame. The preoccupation with these questions often leads to difficulty with identity formation later in the child's life (Silvén Hagström, 2019). The aforementioned researcher argues that grief after parental suicide is particularly detrimental to a child. In contrast, other researchers have found no significant variances between those bereft by suicide and those bereft by natural causes (Melhem et al., 2007). The inconsistency in these research findings is probably due to methodological disparities between the studies.

In this section, the breadth of the concept of loss was explained while emphasising that loss can occur in various ways. In the next section, a developmental perspective on loss and grief facilitates a better understanding of how young people conceptualise death and how they react to loss depending on their age.

## **2.2 A Developmental Perspective on Loss and Grief**

This brief discussion explains how young people understand the concept of death. The focus is on the child's ability to grasp abstract concepts such as the universality, non-functionality, and finality of death. An outline of grief reactions across various developmental stages is also provided. Finally, the investigation into the immediate,

intermediate, and long-term outcomes of parental loss in the early part of a young person's life is discussed.

### ***2.2.1 Understanding Death***

Historically, developmental psychologists assumed that children could not grasp the concept of death. Psychologists believed that children do not experience loss and grief until they are at least 10 years of age (Piaget, 1929). However, psychologists now understand that children can start conceptualising death early. Children can begin to conceptualise death as early as two to three years old, although their understanding may be limited and incomplete at this stage (Bloom, 2018). A young person's understanding of death becomes more complex as they cognitively mature (Dyregrov, 2008; Harris, 2019). Hence, children can experience loss, often in profound ways. However, ignorance of childhood grief gives rise to children often being 'forgotten mourners' (Duncan, 2020, p. 4). Understanding death depends on a child's ability to grasp abstract concepts related to biological death. This ability follows a developmental sequence (Menendez et al., 2020; Speece & Brent, 1992). See Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Developmental Stages in Conceptualising Death*

<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Conceptualisation</b>
0–2 years	Limited understanding of death
2–5 years	Death seen as reversible Magical thinking Begins to understand that all things must die (universality)
5–11 years	End of biological functioning (non-functionality) Understand death as irreversible (finality)

Young infants have a minimal understanding of death. Various researchers point out that the concepts of universality, non-functionality, and finality help children to grasp the idea of death (Menendez et al., 2020; Speece & Brent, 1992). As young children develop, they gradually begin to understand that all living things must die (universality). As early as five years old, children can start to comprehend that death means the cessation of biological functioning (non-functionality) and that death is irreversible (finality). Therefore, children understand that death is a state from which a loved one cannot return. In addition, they can grasp that the deceased's body cannot be restored or repaired (Ferow, 2019). Shortly after six years of age, children recognise that many factors can cause death; people can die unexpectedly, the same as every other living thing (Himebauch et al., 2008; Speece & Brent, 1992). Hence, before the age of five, a young child could appear reasonably indifferent towards the death of a loved one. In contrast, school-going children may experience severe reactions characterised by unhappiness and sadness after a loved one passes away due to their more complex cognitive understanding (Krepia et al., 2017). Therefore, for children to grasp the concept of death fully, they must learn the concepts of universality, non-functionality, and finality.

### ***2.2.2 Grief Reactions Across Developmental Stages***

The previous section explained how children conceptualise death as they grow up. It follows that how a child reacts to a parent's death is dependent on their age. Not only will parental loss affect a child's developmental trajectory but also, the child's age will shape how the child experiences and copes with the loss. Therefore, children will have unique reactions to loss at each developmental phase.

Jeffreys (2011) notes that two reactions are noticeable in childhood grief: (a) the child's emotional response to the loss; and (b) their logical understanding of that loss.

Younger children tend to have an emotional reaction before fully comprehending the impact

of what has happened. Thus, children do respond to loss, albeit in an elementary manner. These emotional responses originate from being separated from their primary caregiver (Jeffreys, 2011). As children develop, their capacity to grasp death becomes evident. Early loss together with an ever-expanding growth of cognitive ability results in greater vulnerability in the child's development (Ferow, 2019; Sanghvi, 2020). Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004) found that children who have experienced the loss of a significant caregiver between birth and three years old are at risk of developing psychological difficulties later in life. Specifically, these difficulties include depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other behavioural and emotional problems (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2011; Morrison et al., 2003). Furthermore, these children may struggle with attachment and trust issues, affecting their ability to form healthy relationships throughout their lives (Morrison et al., 2003). The impact of this type of loss can also affect a child's cognitive development and academic performance (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2005). Older children may also experience complex feelings about having lost a parent. Over time, bereaved children fear failing to recall the essential qualities and memories of the deceased parent. This may be partially due to the belief that such memories are all they have left of the dead (Kaplow et al., 2014). Next, the various grief reactions typically associated with the developmental phases as defined by Jeffreys (2011) are discussed.

**2.2.2.1 Infancy (Birth–2 Years).** Instinctual emotional responses to the separation or death of a caregiver often characterise young infants' grief (Chen, 2018 Lytje et al., 2022). Specifically, they are affected by loss because of the absence of their loved one and the emotional atmosphere at home. Although young children show grief-like behaviour, they may not have the intellectual capacity to comprehend death fully. Therefore, young infants mirror the emotional atmosphere in the home environment, especially if family members are agitated or depressed. Jeffreys (2011), for example, states that infants may search for their

absent mothers and demonstrate noticeable changes in their sleeping and eating routines when experiencing maternal loss. Infants who have lost a significant other tend to be fussier than usual (Jeffreys, 2011; Machajewski & Kronk, 2013).

**2.2.2.2 Pre-school (2–5 Years).** At this stage of development, pre-school children often view death as reversible, which reflects their concrete thinking. Young children and pre-schoolers tend to perceive death as a state of sleep. These youngsters may expect the deceased parent to return and care for their needs (Jeffreys, 2011; Lytje et al., 2022). It is unlikely that a child will incorporate the loss into their life story because they do not fully understand death (Worden, 2018).

Because children of toddler age cannot intellectually grasp the implications of death, their grief expressions are intermittent (Galende, 2015; Jeffreys, 2011). They may appear distressed one moment, only to engage in play the next. Pre-school children may experience loss and separation but often lack the vocabulary for emotional expression. In addition, their emotional reactions usually indicate the surviving parent's emotional state (Galende, 2015; Jeffreys, 2011). They may act out aggressively to express their feelings (Ferow, 2019).

However, it is also common for young children and pre-schoolers to cling to the presence of the remaining caregiver. Moreover, grieving children often present with behaviours that are more immature (Ferow, 2019). These regressive behaviours may include bed-wetting, becoming insecure and dependent, regressing to baby talk, acting out, or demanding to sleep with the surviving parent (Ferow, 2019; Jeffreys, 2011; Werner-Lin & Biank, 2012). Ener and Ray (2018) state that adults may unintentionally confuse children when discussing death by using metaphors or euphemisms or by withholding information to shield them from the truth. For example, saying that a deceased loved one has “gone away” or is “sleeping” may lead young children to expect the person's return, and the lack of clarity may exacerbate their confusion and distress. Additionally, adults may avoid discussing death

altogether with children, believing that it is for their protection, but this can leave children feeling confused and unsupported (Ener & Ray, 2018). Parents may also be influenced by cultural narratives surrounding death, which can shape their own beliefs and attitudes towards death and grieving, and in turn, influence how they communicate about death with their children (Doka, 2016). For example, some cultures may view death as a natural part of life, while others may see it as a taboo topic to be avoided. These cultural beliefs can affect the way that parents approach discussing death with their children and the language and metaphors that they use to do so.

**2.2.2.3 Early Childhood (5–9 Years).** Children in early childhood begin to understand death as irreversible and often assume personal blame for the loss (Menendez et al., 2020). However, five- to nine-year-old children are still concrete thinkers. Children realise that death is permanent at this stage, with all life functions ending (Menendez et al., 2020). It is common for children to demonstrate an interest in the physical aspects of death and the rituals surrounding it. For example, they may have questions about corpses and funerals. These children need to have conversations about death in a way that makes sense to them and that is age appropriate (Himebauch et al., 2008; Jeffreys, 2011; Krepia et al., 2017).

At this age, imagination and ‘magical thinking’ develop, and children often assume a dead person can see and hear the living. Consequently, children often externalise death as a ghost, monster, or skeleton (Ferow, 2019). Children at this age often believe they are responsible for their parent dying because they expressed anger towards them or misbehaved (Carter, 2016). This is known as ‘magical thinking’ and is characterised by fear and fantasy (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011).

Primary school children also tend to experience the full spectrum of loss-related emotions. Feelings of sadness and fear are evident due to their developing cognitive maturity. These children are also more likely to express concern about their living caregivers.

However, they have a limited coping capacity (Worden, 2018). As these children start grasping the reality of the loss, they often use avoidance to cope (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011).

Furthermore, children express their grief through outward behaviour and play (Chachar et al., 2021). Some regressive behaviours may occur. As the child develops, they can incorporate the concepts of certainty and permanence of death into their lived experience. With a more complex understanding of death, children increasingly can assign meaning to their parent's death (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011).

**2.2.2.4 Middle Childhood (10–12 Years).** During middle childhood, children often suppress their experiences and grief in order not to burden caregivers. Children in middle childhood may also exhibit regressive behaviours similar to the five- to nine-year age group. Conversely, they may mimic behaviours often seen in adolescence (Chachar et al., 2021). They may spend more time with their peers, emotionally distancing themselves from their caregivers and seeking independence (Bergman et al., 2017; Jeffreys, 2011). At this age, they may perceive some of their emotional needs as immature and be reluctant to express their emotions or seek help. Being very perceptive to the psychological state of the remaining parent, they withhold the expression of their anger and grief, wishing to protect this parent from being concerned about them (Jeffreys, 2011; Krepia et al., 2017; Melhem et al., 2008; Werner-Lin & Biank, 2012). Children demonstrate strong responses to the surviving parent remarrying at this age.

**2.2.2.5 Early Adolescence (13–14 Years).** Adolescence is a stage of transition.

Physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development characterises this stage and entails significant growth and change together with discovering oneself and others (Chachar et al., 2021). Identity formation is a central task during adolescence as adolescents prepare for adulthood. During adolescence, events and experiences help lay the foundation for moving

towards maturity (Lerner & Galambos, 1998). Narrative identity development in particular has received increasing attention in recent years as a way of understanding how individuals construct their life stories and make meaning of their experiences (McLean et al., 2007). Research has shown that adolescents who are able to construct a positive narrative identity are more likely to experience positive outcomes such as increased well-being, higher self-esteem, and better coping skills (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Various researchers have highlighted that parental loss in early childhood can present psychological difficulties later in adolescence. For example, some studies have shown that early parental loss may result in adolescent eating disorders (Beam et al., 2004; Mosher, 2018). Eating disorders may occur through having significant long-standing challenges in regulating negative and intense emotions. Adolescents may also be more vulnerable to dissociative symptoms and ineffective coping skills. Dissociative functioning is often the result of adolescents' inability to integrate the reality of being permanently separated from their parents.

Mwamwenda (2004) states that losing a parent can often be complex for adolescents because they have not mastered the adjustment to significant life stressors. Although adolescents may grasp the concept of death, they do not always have the social and emotional maturity to cope with it (Maccallum & Bryant, 2013; Noppe & Noppe, 2004; Sanghvi, 2020). They also are at a stage when the loss heightens their sense of justice and fairness. As they reflect on the past, it may be challenging for adolescents to understand why their parent has died.

Losing a parent in early adolescence rather than in early childhood presents different psychological dynamics, primarily because of the parent's role at this developmental stage. For example, parents set boundaries and provide expectations and feedback in addition to warmth, security, and consistency in their adolescent's daily life (Noppe & Noppe, 2004).

Young people grow up knowing that they are loved and with a felt sense of security in the context of the primary attachment that their parents provide. In cases where the attachment is poor, young people often grow up with a sense of insecurity and anxiety (Weymont & Rae, 2006). Thus, in the case of parental loss, the primary attachment is inadvertently ruptured, resulting in psychological distress that significantly affects the adolescent's psychological development. The psychological consequences of such a loss for a developing adolescent can result in mental health challenges later on, possibly lasting well into adulthood (Weymont & Rae, 2006)

Whenever adolescents lose a parent, there is significant psychological conflict. They are propelled towards autonomy while feeling conflicted about wanting to be with their family in a crisis. Parental loss disrupts adolescents differentiating themselves from their parents (Stokes et al., 2009). Adolescents who feel pulled back into the family may experience depression, resentment, guilt, and withdrawal. It may also happen that the surviving parent is not psychologically available to provide a sense of security and love. To hide their grief, adolescents may minimise their loss or express anger. Furthermore, difficulties with sleep and appetite in addition to physical aches are not uncommon for these adolescents (Hill et al., 2019; Malone, 2016; Sanghvi, 2020).

Early adolescents also tend to pay more attention to meaning and existential questions during this stage. However, they find death difficult because adolescence is supposed to be a time of freedom and immortality (Robin & Hatim, 2014). Because of overwhelming feelings, their grief is not constant but somewhat intermittent and episodic as they try to make sense of their loss (Sabatini, 2012).

**2.2.2.6 Late Adolescence (15–19 Years).** Past successes and failures underwrite adolescents' sense of what they expect in the future. Hence, a more stable identity and character is formed (Chen, 2011; Farella Guzzo & Gobbi, 2021; Noppe & Noppe, 2004). Late

adolescents also pursue relationships that are focused on intimacy and commitment.

Therefore, late adolescence is a struggle between intimacy and emotional distance.

Late adolescents have a stronger orientation towards reality. However, this may create more psychological distress in the face of adversity than in younger adolescents (Farella Guzzo & Gobbi, 2021). They may also express a wide range of feelings when experiencing loss. A South African study reported that late adolescents bereaved by parental loss exhibited crying, angry outbursts, fighting, suicidal ideation, and isolation (Macedo et al., 2018).

Guilt specifically is a feeling that may feature in the grieving process, with adolescents feeling that they should have behaved differently towards their deceased parent (Smith et al., 2010). Anger also features as a common emotion during the grieving experience. Late adolescents will often grieve in isolation (Perkins, 2007). Adults may not always know how to respond to them and withdraw support (Çakar, 2020). In addition, peers may not know how to react towards their bereaved friend, which is often a result of immaturity or emotional discomfort. Late adolescents may thus feel isolated and lonely in their grieving process.

African adolescents often lose support when faced with parental death (Li et al., 2008). They may lose the financial aid that provided for their basic needs. In African communities, youth living in poverty and rural areas are especially vulnerable in the face of parental loss (Cluver & Gardner, 2006; Mabotja, 2015). It is common for bereaved young people to live with their extended families who often lack resources themselves (Li et al., 2008). During such situations, extended family members may favour their own children over the bereaved adolescent (Thupayagale-Tshweneagae & Mokomane, 2012).

### ***2.2.3 Developmental Outcomes of Loss***

Balk (2011) asserts that grieving is a lifelong process that continues after a child loses a loved one. He suggests that alternative terms such as ‘handling’, ‘management’, and

‘adaptation’ better describe the grief process. Grief is continuous and wide-ranging; that is, grief comes and goes through an extended development process across the lifespan, resulting in a wide array of developmental outcomes (Ener & Ray, 2018; Ferow, 2019; Sanghvi, 2020). As young people reach different developmental milestones, they will often re-experience their grief. Garber (1988) states that a child needs to try to understand their past. Each developmental phase requires a child to rebuild their loss and build upon their previous understanding of what it means to have lost their parent. Therefore, they may need to step back during each developmental stage and reconstruct the missing piece of their history.

Childhood grief is an emerging field of research. However, researchers have pointed out that parental loss correlates with increased psychological difficulties, including anxiety, depression, and substance use in later life (Kaplow et al., 2010). When a parent dies, a child may suffer traumatic consequences in their development and struggle with adjustment (Cerniglia et al., 2014; Dopp & Cain, 2012). Children who lose their caregiver after three years of age experience more severe psychological consequences (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004). As young people develop, they will adjust to these consequences differently depending on their age.

An extensive body of research highlights the developmental outcomes or effects of parental loss on child development. These effects can be classified as intermediates that appear later in childhood or in adolescence and as long-range or ‘sleeper’ effects that may occur in adulthood (Akerman & Statham, 2011; Owen et al., 1992; Sanghvi, 2020). In considering the impact of a loss over time, it is essential to consider the child’s age, developmental level, and social environment.

**2.2.3.1 Intermediate Outcomes.** A child’s age determines the likelihood of maladaptive outcomes following parental loss. It is extremely important to keep this in mind when considering the transition from childhood to adolescence (Cerniglia et al., 2014).

However, researchers do not always agree about the potential outcomes of early grief on later development. For instance, many children do not develop major mental health problems to a single stressor (Li et al., 2008). Most children who experience a loss can adjust to the loss as they grow without experiencing severe problems (Feigelman et al., 2017). Worden (1996) showed that many years after losing a parent, bereaved children did not present with more concerning behaviours than non-bereaved children. Hence, most bereaved children do not develop severe psychological disorders.

However, a small percentage of children struggle with childhood parental loss later in life. Gray et al. (2011) interviewed children between the ages of 8 years and 18 years, two months after their loss of a parent. In this group, 25% had experienced episodes of severe depression. Among the non-bereaved control sample, only 1% reported the same symptoms.

Another study showed that only a small subgroup of about 20% of young people would possibly experience emotional and behavioural difficulties (Muriel et al., 2018). Several protective factors, including the child's temperament, educational competence, high self-esteem, and a support network, seem to mitigate adverse outcomes in the face of parental bereavement (Luecken & Roubinov, 2012). However, the possible stressful life events that follow death may influence children's protective resources and their adjustment to childhood parental loss in their adolescent years (Maley, 2020). In addition, children do not necessarily disregard their earlier parental loss. Owen (1992) states,

Unlike adults who can sustain a year or more of intense grieving, children are likely to manifest grief-related affects and behaviour, on an intermittent basis, for many years after loss occurs; various powerful reactions to the loss normally will be revived, reviewed, and worked through repeatedly at successive levels of subsequent development. (p. 100)

Children gain a better understanding of concepts with time, for example, the permanence of death (Tafà et al., 2018). Furthermore, during adolescence, children can appreciate their loss and have the capacity to tolerate intense feelings relating to their loss more fully (Owen et al., 1992). A striking finding is that childhood adversity such as parental loss is often associated with delayed pubertal development, particularly in boys (Suglia et al., 2020). In addition, over time, bereaved children are more vulnerable to experiencing academic difficulties, including underperformance in examinations, truancy, decreased motivation in school activities, and exiting the schooling system prematurely (Owen et al., 1992). Often, little to no support is available for bereaved children (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015). A South African study found that mothers' deaths were associated with four to five times higher schooling deficits than fathers' deaths (Case & Ardington, 2006). Additionally, some children have trouble concentrating and are distressed when teachers, peers, and subject material evoke memories of their loved ones (Kock & Lessing, 2016). On the contrary, others will try to achieve at school to honour their deceased parent (Dowdney, 2000).

Bereaved young people may have troubled interpersonal relationships in their later developmental years (Bergman et al., 2017; Maier & Lachman, 2000). From a social developmental perspective, the early loss may negatively shape a person's attempt at forming and maintaining intimate relationships (Simbi et al., 2020). Simbi et al. (2020) argue that a young person may be hesitant to develop new and close relationships out of fear of losing them.

**2.2.3.2 Long-Term (Delayed) Outcomes.** Many researchers have asserted that childhood grief is associated with a substantial decrease in adult well-being (Marks et al., 2007; Moor & De Graaf, 2016). However, retrospective studies on adults who experienced parental loss in childhood inform researchers' understanding of childhood grief (Nickerson et al., 2013). The adults in these studies often experienced mental health challenges. This earlier

research demonstrated that parental loss was often the cause of mental health disorders in later life.

The body of research yields other interesting findings. Regarding physical health, adults who lost a significant other in their early years are 10% more likely to develop cancer (Momen et al., 2013). From a physical perspective, chronic illnesses, cortisol dysregulation, and premature death are reported more often among people who experienced parental loss later in their developmental years (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011; Li, Vestergaard et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014). In addition, Parsons (2011) found that adult males who had lost a parent as a child had worse health than males whose families were intact.

Psychologically, some researchers have indicated a correlation between parental loss and mood disorders (Pham et al., 2018). Losing a parent before the age of 18 years made these individuals almost twice as likely to develop depression in adulthood. Furthermore, nearly one in five adolescent girls in South Africa reported complicated grief reactions after losing someone close to them (Thurman et al., 2018).

According to a study by Fu (2019), early parental death affects cognitive and intellectual functioning into old age. Losing a mother before the age of 16 years amplified the likelihood of older males developing severe cognitive impairment (but not females). This finding was independent of demographic, socioeconomic, and physical health status (Fu, 2019). The loss of a parent often depletes critical social and economic resources. Hence, a lack of resources can dramatically affect cognitive development. However, it is noted that education can mediate the relationship between intellectual development and early parental loss (Gimenez et al., 2013). According to Fu's (2016) study, maternal death is more harmful to cognitive development than paternal death in childhood.

Future longitudinal studies on parental loss at specific stages of development would help to explain the grief experiences of young people further. Moreover, the field of

developmental psychopathology could be especially useful in helping psychologists understand (a) how parental loss can complicate typical developmental tasks, (b) how protective factors facilitate resilient outcomes in the face of loss, and (c) how the developmental timing of the loss together with the post-loss environment contribute to outcomes.

### **2.3 Grief Theories and Loss**

Loss, specifically parental loss, is often followed by a range of responses that are collectively known as grief. Researchers in psychology have theorised about what triggers the grief response in human beings. Bowlby's attachment theory initially informed psychology's understanding of grief (Bowlby, 1969). He proposed that children experience separation distress when removed from an attachment figure such as a parent. Therefore, death would sever the affectional bond, resulting in grief. In his view, Bowlby (1969) conceptualised grief as an adaptive response that seeks to ensure safety and security. Researchers have also described grief as a process of adaptation and making sense of loss (Cerniglia et al., 2014). An individual's sense of security and safety is restored over time as they integrate the reality of the loss into their evolving sense of self.

Historically, researchers have proposed many theories to capture the grieving process. However, scholars have questioned many popular approaches such as the stage model of Kübler-Ross (Kübler-Ross, 2005). These theories often portray the grieving process as linear, sequential, and prescriptive (Gross, 2018). In later years, grief theorists proposed that the bereaved must master certain tasks in order for them to come to terms with their loss (Worden, 1996). Despite the evolution of the grief task theories, the theories remain limited in describing the nuances of personal grief and the context (e.g., sociocultural context) in which the individual grieves. In their social constructionist account of grief, Neimeyer et al. (2014) state that grief is not primarily an internal process, as is commonly thought in Western

cultures, but is rather an intricately social one. People who have lost a loved one often search for meaning in their lives, their communities, and even their cultures. A social constructionist model of grieving is suggested here in which meaning is found, appropriated, or assembled by narrative processes between people and within them (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer et al., 2010).

Grief theories generally lack a developmental lens, ignoring the multiple factors that facilitate adjustment to the loss and its secondary consequences for young bereaved people. Grief theorists also tend to neglect the experience of grieving children. Therefore, applying grief theories to children seems fraught with difficulty. Nader and Salloum (2011) state,

[D]evelopmental differences in youths' understanding of death and other aspects of loss, the nature and progression of emerging skills (e.g., self-regulation, identity formation, coping capacity), and brain growth suggest the likelihood of differences in the impact of loss, grief presentation, and treatment needs for varying age groups. (p. 233).

However, grief theorists often do not account for the unique and formative experiences of bereaved children and adolescents. Brits et al. (2014) point out that much of the bereavement literature focuses on child and adolescent pathological grief. According to the same authors, normative grieving processes for children and adolescents need further research.

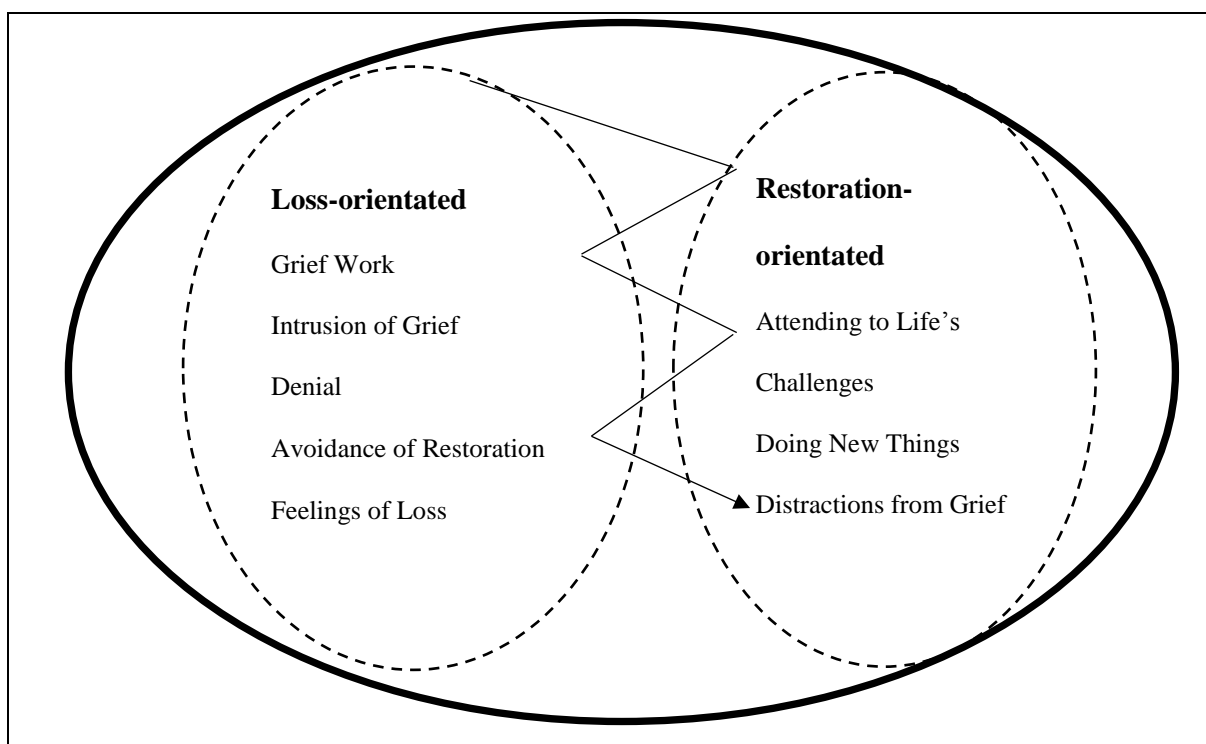
In this study, it is contended that traditional grief theorists are limited in describing the complexity of young people's grief reactions and processes. However, a functional model in conceptualising the grieving process of children and adolescents is the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement. Additionally, the Meaning Reconstruction Model (Neimeyer et al., 2014) and the Continuing Bonds Model (Klass et al., 1996) provide broader, more inclusive, and contextually relevant perspectives on child and adolescent losses.

### 2.3.1 The Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement

Rather than understanding grief as a process of stages and tasks, Stroebe and Schut (2008) describe a model of grief as a cyclical process of confronting and accepting the loss. They have referred to these processes as oscillating between loss-orientated and restoration-orientated stressors.

**Figure 2**

*Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement*



In the context of parental loss, loss-orientated processes address the loss of the parent and the range of feelings and emotions that often accompany it. A person's grief is expressed in various ways following the death of a loved one. Conversely, the restoration-orientated processes refer to attending to daily life demands such as attending school, interacting with peers, and distracting oneself from the grief (Van Doeselaar et al., 2020).

Cyclically moving between these processes helps the young person adjust to the loss over time. Children's grief reflects this process of moving between play and sadness (Chen &

Panebianco, 2018). In their study, Bylund-Grenklo et al. (2021) report that children and adolescents have limited tolerance for emotional pain. The intensity of emotions such as yearning, sadness, or anger experienced by young people is not uncommon, but it is a restoration-orientated process that relieves the psychological distress associated with loss-orientated processes (Cohen & Samp, 2018). Stroebe and Schut (2008) argue that restoration-orientated actions require mastery of tasks, learning new things, and adjusting to new identities. In time, the child adapts to their loss through oscillation between the loss and the restoration processes (Stroebe & Schut, 2008).

A young person's attachment style will significantly determine how they oscillate between the loss and the restoration processes (Fiore, 2021; Van Doeselaar et al., 2020). These attachment styles are foundational in the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2008). In her seminal work on attachment styles, Ainsworth (1978) identifies three types of styles (i.e., secure, anxious-avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent). Later research expanded on this to include a fourth attachment style known as disorganised attachment (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Main & Solomon, 1990).

Securely attached individuals tend to be the most capable of oscillating between the processes without remaining fixated on the restoration processes (anxious-avoidant style) or the loss orientation (anxious-ambivalent type) or the experience of trauma symptoms after a loss (disorganised/disorientated style) (Stroebe et al., 2005). Regardless of their attachment style, shortly after losing a parent, young people are more likely to engage in loss-orientated processes in which they experience negative emotions. Over time, their mood will become more positive as they spend less time in loss orientation (Fiore, 2021).

Stroebe and Schut (2004) propose that reflecting on the loss for an extended period (loss-orientated process) may exacerbate feelings of grief. Conversely, making positive appraisals (part of the meaning-making process) may lessen feelings of grief (Stroebe &

Schut, 2004). Finding existential meaning in the loss can help adolescents make sense of their loss and contribute to their identity construction. However, Stroebe and Schut (2004) state that grieving is neglected if individuals uphold positive psychological states unremittingly because the loss will not be integrated into their identity (Koblenz, 2016). The oscillation between loss and restoration stressors is thus essential.

### ***2.3.2 The Continuing Bonds Model of Loss***

Grief models in contemporary psychology now advocate ‘continuing bonds’. The Continuing Bonds Model of Loss suggests that bereaved people form new and alternative relationships with their deceased loved ones instead of distancing themselves from them (Irwin, 2015). Individuals must create an alternative identity for the deceased, which allows them to continue to exist in the lives of survivors (Clabburn et al., 2019). For some bereaved individuals, maintaining a bond with the deceased is psychologically beneficial (Klass et al., 1996). In their seminal work, Nickman et al. (1998) theorised that there are five dimensions to this connection: (a) locating the deceased (e.g., heaven), (b) feeling the presence of the deceased (e.g., in dreams), (c) communicating with the deceased (visiting the cemetery, speaking to them), (d) recalling memories of the deceased, and (e) sensing a connection via ‘transitional objects’ (e.g., a watch or piece of clothing). More recent research considered ‘memorial tattoos’ as a continuing bond and a way to honour a deceased person (Cadell et al., 2022). Through the inked representations of their bodies, participants in the study expressed the sense that the deceased person was with them (Cadell et al., 2022).

According to Field and Filanosky (2009), continuing bonds can be divided into two groups: internalised and externalised. An internalised continuing bond refers to experiences centred on contemplation, reflection, and reminiscing. As a result, such continuing bonds are said to be based on an internally secure base. A continuing bond that is externalised occurs

when the deceased is perceived as still present (e.g., by hearing or seeing them when awake). Experiencing externalised experiences is caused by not acknowledging death's finality.

According to Clabburn et al. (2019), young people often feel connected to the deceased through spontaneous and natural events. Young people who have lost a loved one often experience fleeting memories and hallucinations of their deceased loved one. Although some youth experience this as comforting, for others, it is a source of stress (Root & Exline, 2014). During the early stages of loss, young children are more likely to talk about their experiences.

However, some researchers found that the lack of a continuing bond resulted in more psychological distress for individuals. Researchers found that participants expressed the need to discuss their deceased parent more often in their family home (Nader & Salloum, 2011). The bereaved believed that knowing more about their deceased parent assisted them in determining who the deceased were (i.e., identity development) (Clabburn et al., 2019; Janusz & Jurek, 2018; Karydi, 2018).

Advocates of this theory state that the nature of continuing bonds must change over time (Koblenz, 2016). Children develop internal representations of their deceased parent that help them to maintain a relationship with them, and these change as they mature. Grief becomes less intense as a result. As a child loses a parent, they re-evaluate their relationship with that parent. In memorialising a deceased parent, they allow life to go on. An explanation of this process is provided below.

Through a process [called] 'constructing' the deceased, the child develops an inner representation of the dead parent that allows him or her to maintain a relationship with the deceased, a relationship that changes as the child matures and the intensity of the grief lessens. The child negotiates and renegotiates the meaning of the loss, and in

time, relocates the dead person in his or her life and memorializes that person in a way that allows life to move on. (Worden, 1991, p. 27)

As much as there is support for continuing bonds, researchers have also pointed out that a continued attachment to the deceased may lead to poor adjustment (Root & Exline, 2014). Continuing bonds may be psychologically detrimental to an individual, resulting in a complicated relationship with the dead (Field & Filanosky, 2009). Regarding violent deaths such as homicides or suicides, the complexity of the grief process is often heightened due to the traumatic and unexpected nature of the loss (Boelen & Lenferink, 2020). This can make it more difficult for individuals to navigate their continuing bonds with the deceased and may even result in the development of post-traumatic stress symptoms (Boelen, de Keijser & Smid 2015).

### ***2.3.3 Meaning Reconstruction Model***

Earlier theories such as existentialism argue that contextualising the loss of a loved one with meaning enables the bereaved to cope (Koblenz, 2016). Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction Model (Neimeyer, 2019; Neimeyer et al., 2014; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2019) is similar to Victor Frankl's theory, which suggests that persons who suffer significant losses seek meaning to find healing. However, the model of Neimeyer (2019) is more contextual as the authors position it as a constructionist model. Grief is often viewed through an essentialist lens, indicative of a culture that emphasises individualism. As a result of this essentialist approach, grief is psychologised and attributed more to an individual's inner state than to broader social structures or systems. Neimeyer et al. (2019) propose a constructionist model which acknowledges that the grieving process of the bereaved is influenced by societal factors.. The researchers state that culture shapes grief reactions and sets norms for survivors' feelings and behaviours.

Focusing on the psychological reactions to loss, Neimeyer et al. (2014) argue that when people lose a loved one, they lose both the person and what they meant to them. The bereaved must thus confront the painful and challenging process of developing a new meaning without the deceased in their life. Moreover, the bereaved must make sense of their loss and fit it into their worldview (Black, 2014). As a result, grieving individuals struggle to affirm or rebuild meaning.

A key concept within Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction Model is that a reconstructed narrative helps people make sense of their lives in the aftermath of loss (Neimeyer, 2019). In the wake of their loss, humans attempt to construct a coherent narrative of their lives. Expanding on this, Neimeyer et al. (2002) state,

[T]he losses of those who have been the intimate witnesses to our past ... can undermine even our basic self-definition as no one any longer occupies the special relational stance toward us needed to call forth and validate the unique fund of shared memories that sustains our sense of who we have been. (p. 239)

The loss of someone close to them such as a parent consequently leads individuals to incorporate the reality of an ever-changing world into their understanding of themselves (Neimeyer et al., 2002). In the face of loss, young people must re-join their past, present, and future in meaningful ways to construct an identity as they mature. In doing so, late adolescents in particular will form new perspectives and reinterpret their past relationship with their deceased parent. They must create meaning and purpose in their current lives and redefine future hopes and dreams (Stillion & Attig, 2015). In the study of Koblenz (2016), the participants indicated that accepting the loss meant recognising it as a continual process throughout their lifespan.

During the grieving process, the bereaved need to rewrite their life story. People thus create a new chapter in their life as they attempt to reconstruct meaning from their loss.

Meaning is not to be found merely in bereaved individuals' private thoughts and feelings when considering meaning from a constructionist perspective (Neimeyer, 2019; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2019). In some situations, interpretations, beliefs, and self-statements can convey meaning. Meaning can be constructed from a variety of sources, including individual consciousness. The language people use, the cultural practices they follow, the spiritual traditions they observe, and the way they communicate with each other all contribute to the meaning of loss for an individual or group (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2019). Even what seems irreducibly personal such as individuals' implicit working model of themselves and the world is rooted in their attachments and social world.

As adolescents give new meaning to their loss, they can sustain a relationship with their deceased parent through a continued bond (Sirrinc et al., 2018). However, they must acknowledge that the relationship is different now that their loved one is dead. In some instances, the psychological connection with the deceased remains and is not severed or terminated (Claburn et al., 2019). Consequently, this meaning-making process differs from the idea that each person must move through a set of highly structured stages and tasks when mourning.

This section briefly explained how children adjust to loss over time and how continuing bonds may facilitate or impede psychological adjustment. Adjustment is not so much an end goal but a continual process of reconstructing meaning at various points of a person's life story. Different influences shape this process of adjustment, and these are discussed next.

## **2.4 Factors That Influence Reaction to Parental Loss**

As noted earlier, young people will present various behaviours and reactions after parental loss. Although young people display general grief reactions, there are significant individual differences. Various factors influence these reactions, and these are classified

according to personal characteristics and the relational, family, social, and cultural factors that affect the young person's grief responses and intensity.

#### **2.4.1 Individual Factors**

Several factors in the young person's life will determine how they adjust to their parent's death. It is important not to consider these factors separately but rather as a complex system of factors that interact and influence each other.

**2.4.1.1 Historical Losses.** Past experiences of multiple losses in a child's life can be considered a considerable developmental risk factor for children (Brits et al., 2014). Adults may erroneously believe that children adapt quickly to multiple losses (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2021). However, researchers have shown that children become more sensitised as they experience the ever-increasing death of loved ones. The sadness, worry, and anxiety of bereaved children accumulate over time despite children often dissociating from overwhelming emotions (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2021). Dissociation can result in a myriad of adverse psychological outcomes in later life. Hence, it is evident that significant psychological resources will have to be made available to children who have experienced multiple losses. For example, children who have lost numerous family members to the COVID-19 pandemic will need support services.

**2.4.1.2 Secondary Losses.** Losing a parent results in additional stress, making the grieving process challenging for children and adolescents. These stressors can include the loss of financial stability, the stigma associated with the death, changes in family roles, or the loss of their home. Secondary losses can compromise a child's psychological well-being over time (Thompson et al., 1998). A Zimbabwean study illustrated that the adverse circumstances after parental or caregiver loss resulted in psychological distress (Nyamukapa et al., 2008). The more challenging the secondary losses, the more difficult it may be for the young person to adjust.

**2.4.1.3 Assumptive Worldviews.** Human beings form assumptions about how the world works; this is known as their assumptive worldview (Beder, 2004; Currier et al., 2009). The assumptive world represents the “strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognising planning, and acting” (Parkes, 1975, p. 132). A person’s early life experiences and attachment bonds strongly influence their assumptions. These assumptive worldviews include perceptions of the world as “benevolent (vs. hostile and dangerous), the world as meaningful (in contrast with being random or out of control), and the self as worthy (rather than worthless or undeserving)” (Captari et al., 2021,p. 96).

Harris (2019, p. 8) asserts,

[T]he assumptive world is an organised schema reflecting all that a person assumes to be true about the world and the self; it refers to the assumptions, or beliefs, that create a sense of security, predictability, and meaning/purpose to life. (p. 8)

The attachment system shapes an individual’s assumptive worldviews. Furthermore, the established assumptions are profoundly embedded in how individuals live. The attachment system also shapes how individuals interpret life events in their past, present, and future (Beder, 2004; Captari et al., 2021; Janoff-Bulman, 2010).

Trauma such as parental loss and the subsequent secondary losses can dramatically compromise a child’s assumptive worldview. This is especially true if the trauma happened in the formative years. It is essential to consider that loss challenges the child’s assumptive worldviews. Neimeyer et al. (2008) state that these altered assumptive worldviews disrupt the consistency of one’s life story and can erode a person’s life story. Having a parent die can cause a young person to feel uncertain, unpredictable, or out of control. Developing children may be bereaved of the attachment bonds that provide meaning and that secure their

fundamental identity. Young people must re-orientate themselves and their world in the face of parental loss to navigate their future selves.

### **2.4.2 Relational Factors**

The nature and dynamics of relationships with significant others such as parents, families, and peers also affect grief reactions and processes in young people. These factors are discussed below.

**2.4.2.1 Nature of the Attachment to the Parent.** From an early age, a child develops a particular attachment style that depends on the psychological availability of the parent (Ainsworth, 1978). This attachment style facilitates social and emotional development. Children often experience separation distress when the relationship with their attachment figure is severed. It follows that separation from a parent, primarily in the younger years, can result in attachment difficulties later. Worden (1996) argues that grief intensity reflects the strength of the attachment relationship. Furthermore, considering that parents provide children with security and self-esteem, their grief reaction is often complicated in the aftermath of the loss of a parent.

Various theories have proposed a link between grief and attachment styles (Meyer-Lee et al., 2020). Most of the research, however, focuses on adults. Hence, one should be careful to generalise these findings to children's grief experiences. In summary, children who feel supported and cared for have a secure attachment style (Captari et al., 2021). These children can process the pain of the death of their deceased parent with greater ease. They can move on to develop healthy relationships and adapt to the loss (Høeg et al., 2018). In contrast, children with insecure attachment styles may find adapting more challenging. When a parent dies, it can have cause an attachment rupture (Høeg et al., 2018). Children with an insecure attachment style may present a myriad of psychological difficulties. For example, regulating their feelings and managing external stresses may be challenging. These children

may develop low self-efficacy and self-esteem and may come across as helpless and unable to cope without the support of others (Captari et al., 2021). It is also possible that they will demonstrate anger and perceive others as unreliable and untrustworthy (Field, 2006; Lind et al., 2020; Maccallum & Bryant, 2013; Willcox et al., 2019).

**2.4.2.2 Mental Health of the Surviving Parent.** Children depend on adults to fulfil their needs and to take care of them. However, how the surviving parent copes and their quality of caregiving can directly affect the child's coping strategies (Cipriano & Cipriano, 2019). Losing a life partner may result in psychological and financial difficulties for the surviving parent, compromising their ability to be fully present for their child. Thurman et al. (2018) found that 43% of adolescent girls and their families experienced financial difficulties after a parent died. The economic status of these girls was associated with an 88% higher chance of developing complicated grief.

Many surviving parents and caregivers in sub-Saharan Africa experience higher poverty and housing instability after losing their partner (Sherr & Mueller, 2009). Extended families such as grandmothers often raise children after their parents pass away. Providing care can place significant physical, financial, and emotional burdens on these caregivers and can affect their daily functioning (Nyambedha et al., 2003). Surprisingly, older caregivers experience more grief as their self-efficacy and social support increase (Pennebaker et al., 2001). These researchers explain this phenomenon by stating that increased social support facilitates a greater expression of emotions. Despite this, expressing feelings does not necessarily result in emotional recovery or a reduction in the emotional load of caring for a suffering child. Greater emotional expression may make the situation more challenging.

Children need empathetic and supportive communication from their caregivers. Positively reminiscing about their deceased parent at a later date can have psychological benefits for children. These conversations can facilitate a greater connection with the dead

through a continuing bond (Castle & Phillips, 2003). However, when caregivers attempt to reflect positively and recall memories about the deceased parent soon after the death, bereaved children may experience intensified distress (Kaplow et al., 2014). The timing of these conversations is, therefore, essential. Shapiro et al. (2014) also found that children experience psychological distress when their mothers do not express sadness or depression after a parental loss. Wardecker et al. (2017) state,

Parentally bereaved youth may benefit from observing 'normative' levels of sadness or distress in parental language and behaviour in the first few months following the death, which may then naturally transition over time to more positive language during caregiver-facilitated reminiscing about the deceased parent. (p. 11)

**2.4.2.3 Family Dynamics.** Most grief researchers conceptualise loss from the perspective of the individual. As a result, understanding family dynamics has not been the primary focus of bereavement research (Greeff & Human, 2004). However, the death of a family member affects the homeostasis and the patterns of interaction of the family system. Families face immediate and long-term adaptation challenges after a death. Adjusting to loss is not a process of finally overcoming the death. It is impossible to assign a logical sequence or timeline to mourning, and an individual may never be able to recover from significant losses fully. Resilience does not simply mean overcoming adversity or gaining 'closure' (Stroebe & Schut, 2015; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013).

Stroebe and Schut (2015) theorise that families must engage in four tasks to ensure short- and long-term adaptation. First, family members must be able to acknowledge and accept the nature of the death and the loss. Second, there must be shared experiences of the loss. Walsh (2006) maintains that family rituals can provide stability in the face of significant loss. Rituals offer continuity that helps link the past, present, and future through sharing traditions. Thus, family rituals can facilitate a greater sense of self and identity. Third, the

family must reorganise themselves and rearrange roles. Boss et al. (2016) contend that a lack of clear communication around role expectations and boundaries in the aftermath of a family death can result in mental health challenges. Lastly, family members must reinvest in other relationships and life pursuits. To adapt, the family must reorganise themselves and reinvest in different life pursuits, roles, rules, meanings, and lifestyles.

**2.4.2.4 Social Support.** Social support from friends, family, and community members greatly facilitates adapting to the loss of a parent. The absence of social support significantly amplifies the difficulties in dealing with loss (Bergman et al., 2017; Cohen & Samp, 2018). These difficulties can contribute to psychological stress and dysfunction. Support can take many forms, including companionship, information, practical help, and assistance. According to Koblenz (2016), when faced with loss, children find it increasingly difficult to maintain relationships with their peers because they now view themselves as different and thus inadequate and inferior. Their compromised self-image may make reaching out to their peers challenging (LaFreniere & Cain, 2015). However, the participants in the study of Koblenz (2016) indicated that connecting with other bereaved children who had experienced similar circumstances was helpful.

Bereaved children have also suggested that peer support can be beneficial in adjusting to the loss (Dopp & Cain, 2012). Adolescents often report peer support as a significant source of emotional help. For instance, Worden (1996) proclaims that children with higher self-esteem and better adjustment post loss often state that conversing with friends about the death is very helpful. One-fifth of the child participants in the Harvard Childhood Bereavement Study indicated that they spent time with their peers post loss (Silverman & Worden, 1992).

Parentally bereaved young people may avoid talking about death because they fear that they will cry and feel that the topic is too personal. They may also avoid talking about

their loss since they do not want to feel different from their friends, implying inferiority (Sandler et al., 2003). Boys are more reluctant to share their experiences and feelings about their loss openly with their peers whereas girls show higher self-disclosure, caring, and intimacy (Berndt, 2002).

Peers are not directly involved in the family and can provide better emotional support (Ross, 1999). Many children's families cannot provide adequate support owing to their grief and thus, peer support becomes essential in times of bereavement (Saldinger et al., 2004). However, peers may be reluctant to discuss the topic of parental death because it may result in uncomfortable feelings, which they want to avoid. As much as reaching out for peer support is essential, certain personality traits in bereaved children may make this task difficult. Children vulnerable to peer intimidation find it increasingly challenging to obtain and use social support from their peer group (Rudolph & Asher, 2000).

### ***2.4.3 Social and Cultural Factors***

Several other issues, including social, and cultural factors, also influence how a young person will adjust to parental loss.

**2.4.3.1 Cultural, Religious, and Media Factors.** A family's cultural and religious context also shapes how death is experienced (Harris & Giménez, 2005; Menendez et al., 2020). Children first grasp the biological conceptions of death, with the subsequent understanding of the cultural and religious elements following later. Moreover, the biological and cultural concepts of death may be contradictory (Menendez et al., 2020). For instance, a biological explanation of death describes death as the discontinuation of life. In contrast, some cultural and religious descriptions often portray death as transitional and supernatural. African cosmology, for example, states that people do not die; the dead are still with the living in the form of ancestral spirits (Onukwugha, 2008). Therefore, Africans believe that the life of the deceased has not ended but has changed into a spiritual state. A biological and

metaphysical understanding of death thus coincides in children's minds; how children reconcile these seemingly different perspectives is still unknown (Harris & Giménez, 2005). Hence, culture can shape how children perceive death, which may shape their grief experience.

Another contributing factor to children's comprehension and experience of death is media portrayals (Hillis, 2018). Children are often curious about death and dying after reading or watching images in the media. To expose children to death and dying and stimulate parental communication about this subject, media portrayals of death appear to be at least as important as direct experience (Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018). Children also understand death to the extent that they partake in cultural and religious rituals such as funerals (Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018; Menendez et al., 2020).

## **2.5 Gender and Grief**

There is limited research on gender differences among bereaved children and adolescents. Doka and Martin (1998) and Martin and Doka (2000, 2011), researchers in grief and loss, were the first to have shown a particular interest in gender-related differences and patterns of adapting to loss. They emphasised that there is a wide variety of equally valid grief responses. Individuals tend to fall on a continuum of grief reactions that ranges from instrumental grief (problem-solving approach to grief) to intuitive grief (emotive, help-seeking approach) (Doka & Martin, 1998; Martin & Doka, 2000, 2011).

In their seminal work, Doka and Martin (1998) found that males often process instrumental grief intellectually and through their behaviour. Likewise, boys tend to be less inclined than girls to talk about their loss and the associated feelings (Dyregrov, 2008). This difference seems even more noticeable during adolescence, with boys trying to avoid thinking about loss altogether. Therefore, boys' grief reactions are often positioned more within the cognitive domain than the emotive and affective domain (Martin, 2014; Martin &

Doka, 2011). Furthermore, males also appear to choose an activity to deal with unpleasant feelings (Doka & Martin, 2010). In the study of Dyregrov et al. (1994), when the researchers asked the boys to express their feelings in writing, the boys could not adequately translate their feelings into words. Adaptive responses, including sarcasm and humour, may characterise the ways of discharging feelings among males (Doka & Martin, 1998).

Boys' reluctance to express their feelings does not necessarily result in later difficulties. According to Bonanno et al. (1995), adaptation to the loss may be facilitated by deliberately avoiding negative emotions. Furthermore, females do not necessarily grieve more effectively than males; researchers have indicated the contrary (Creighton et al., 2013; Martin & Doka, 1998, 2011). Creighton et al. (2013) found that male caregivers reported higher levels of positive coping strategies and lower levels of negative coping strategies than female caregivers. Some possible explanations have been suggested. One possibility is that male caregivers may have greater access to social support networks that can provide them with practical and emotional support. Additionally, gender role expectations may play a role as male caregivers may be more likely to seek out practical solutions to problems, while female caregivers may be more likely to focus on emotional support (Creighton et al., 2013). Hence, Martin and Doka (2011) challenges the Westernised view that an individual must voice and express feelings and reactions after losing someone to death.

However, some boys are more intuitive in their grieving style (Gamino et al., 2020). The extent to which they feel comfortable expressing their emotions largely depends on the emotional climate within their family culture (Jeffreys, 2011). Children learn by observing the actions of others in similar situations. For example, some cultures encourage the restricted expression of emotion whereas others encourage emotional expression. The emotional expression among different genders is thus heavily informed by socialisation (Rugala, 2001). For example, hegemonic masculinity shapes male emotional expression in a patriarchal

society such as in South Africa. Specifically, hegemonic masculinity describes the cultural ideals of maleness promoted by the central and dominant form of masculinity within a particular culture (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; McAdams, 2005; Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele et al., 2010). Hegemonic masculinity entails several characteristics that males are encouraged to internalise in their behaviour and identity. It shapes and forms the foundations for how males should behave. Some of these characteristics include aggression and emotional restraint. The ideals of African hegemonic masculinity are associated with an identity characterised by assertiveness and aggression, fearlessness, practicality, resistance to problems, and stoicism (Morrell et al., 2012). The expression of sadness, crying, and vulnerability typical of loss-orientated stressors may be challenging for adolescent males due to hegemonic masculinity (Creighton et al., 2013).

Therefore, as a social and cultural factor, hegemonic masculinity shapes the loss experiences of adolescent male. Creighton et al. (2013) identify emptiness, anger, stoicism, and lack of sentimentality as the predominant grief responses of men. The study of Creighton et al. (2013) highlights the difficulty of reconciling feelings of vulnerability with the masculine ideals of strength and stoicism. In addition, Bennett (2007) demonstrates how males discuss their experiences of loss and grief. It is rare for men to live up to the masculine ideal despite endorsing it. As a result, they often feel powerless rather than powerful and bereavement further compounds this predicament.

It is proposed that boys with an intuitive grieving style may find it more challenging to express their grief when growing up in a patriarchal society that supports hegemonic masculinity or in an emotionally restricted family context. Oransky and Marecek (2009) state that the boys in their study who expressed pain or worry were seen as 'gay' or 'girly' by their peers. Hence, deviation from societal norms can lead to exclusion from the peer group, resulting in adverse mental health outcomes. Society silences boys' authentic expressions,

suppressing their vulnerable selves (Pollack, 2006). As a result, boys tend to harbour feelings of unhappiness and uncertainty, giving rise to future fears. Despite deep-seated feelings of insecurity and vulnerability among some boys, the pressure to portray a confident personality may lead boys to become more aggressive and frustrated. Silverman and Worden (1992) state that boys are often encouraged to be independent early in their lives. They learn early on to separate from their inner emotional lives.

In addition to the diversity of grief responses among genders, it is also essential to consider the grief trajectory. Schmiede et al. (2006) report that females in their study presented with continual internalising problems, but in the 45 months following the death, the young males showed no evidence of internalising issues. According to longitudinal research (Bergman et al., 2017; Reinherz et al., 1999), females are more likely than males to suffer from major depression caused by parental loss during young adulthood. Several theoretical models account for this finding. First, an active problem-solving approach (instrumental grieving) or distraction results in greater constancy in child and adolescent depression (Grant et al., 2004). In addition, researchers have asserted that males often have a worldview that provides them with the belief that they can ultimately overcome any crisis they may encounter. Males, therefore, have a greater sense of control (Wortman et al., 1993). Although they may experience similar emotions to females, males tend to have reduced emotional reactions due to this worldview (Doka & Martin, 1998).

Sandler et al. (2003) propose that boys face fewer caregiving responsibilities after a parental loss than girls. The caregiving burden on girls may explain higher rates of mental health concerns. Abandonment fears may result in a higher risk for depression and anxiety among girls than boys (Rudolph & Flynn, 2007). From the findings mentioned above, it can be concluded that the gender landscape and how it relates to the expression and experience of grief is complex and can result in several potential psychological outcomes.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Losing a parent in childhood is a critical event that shapes a young person's future life story. However, the complex interplay of numerous factors makes this a highly distinctive process, especially in late adolescence. An integrated model does not exist to conceptualise adequately how these factors interact. The lack of theoretical integration of research literature makes it challenging to conceptualise how children make sense of early parental loss and how it shapes their later lives. Contradictory findings between qualitative and quantitative studies in childhood bereavement also add to the complexity of making sense of the data.

Nevertheless, a child's past attachment to the deceased parent seems to form the foundation of their grief trajectory. In addition, how the remaining caregiver explains the death and provides emotional nurturance profoundly influences the child's life story. The various secondary losses and stressors of losing a life partner can significantly pressure the remaining parent. Thus, the surviving parent's well-being may profoundly shape how the child develops and how the young person tells the story of their loss.

Furthermore, the complex nature of loss makes it challenging to determine how late adolescent males will narrate their life stories. A sudden or traumatic death may disrupt assumptions about their worldviews and sense of self. In turn, it may complicate finding meaning in the event. However, it seems possible that males who have not been allowed to express their grief will have more difficulty making sense of loss. All this is further complicated in a society that often does not acknowledge the impact that early loss can have later in a child's life. In the next chapter, attention is turned to the pivotal role of an adolescent's life story, also known as their narrative identity.

## Chapter 3: Narrative Identity and Meaning-Making

*“If we wish to know about a man, we ask ‘what is his story—his real, inmost story?’—for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us.”*

(Oliver Sacks, 1985, p. 110)

People typically share accounts of their lives when describing how they came to be who they are. This personal life story, or what is known as a person’s narrative identity, is of central interest in this research study within the context of parental loss. Specifically, this chapter focuses on how individuals, especially late adolescent males, construct their narrative identities and find meaning in their stories of loss.

First, a comprehensive definition of narrative identity is provided. Next, the developmental process that shapes an individual’s personality and how they reveal their identity to themselves and others is discussed. A person’s identity cannot be separated from the cultural context that shapes it. Therefore, the influence of the ‘master narratives’ that are derived from a person’s culture and that shape individuals’ life stories is investigated. Gender master narratives are highlighted since they profoundly shape the identities of adolescent males. The discussion continues by taking a deeper look at the structure and themes that individuals’ life stories typically take. The chapter concludes by discussing how individuals derive meaning from life experiences such as loss.

### 3.1 Conceptualising Narrative Identity

In this section, narrative identity is defined. In addition, the research on adolescents’ narrative identities is outlined to emphasise the critical link between narrative identity and mental health.

### ***3.1.1 Defining Narrative Identity***

Researchers theorise that individuals integrate numerous stories across their lifetime and believe that these stories form the foundations of individuals' identities and sense of self (Dunlop, 2017; McAdams, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013). McAdams (2001) argues that people's identities are strikingly similar to literary stories. Individuals use specific settings, scenes, characters, plots, and themes in describing their lives, just as they would in an autobiography. Narrative identity is aptly referred to as one's personal life story.

McAdams and McLean (2013) define a narrative identity as "a person's internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (p. 1). In this way, an individual's narrative identity serves as an organising construct for their life, providing meaning, purpose, and coherence (Banks, 2013). Researchers study individuals' life stories to understand their personality traits, values, goals, and life experiences and to provide insight into the cultures that shape the life stories of the individuals. Gender, race, and class form the backdrop to individual narrative identities (McLean et al., 2020; Singer, 2004).

The terms 'narrative identity' and 'life story' are often used interchangeably, but they refer to slightly different aspects of a person's life experience. While a life story is a broader concept that includes a person's dispositional traits, goals, motivations, and overall life experience, narrative identity focuses specifically on the internalised and evolving story that a person creates to make sense of their life experiences (Pasupathi & Adler, 2021). Although the difference is subtle, it is important for researchers and practitioners to understand these distinctions to appreciate fully the role of both narrative identity and life story in human development. For the purposes of this study, the terms 'narrative identity' and 'life story' are used interchangeably.

McAdams (2013, 2015) proposes narrative identity as part of a broader theory of personality development. Although individuals share their life stories from a young age, particularly during late adolescence, they actively begin to reinterpret their past, present, and future (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Their evolving story provides clarity and a sense of direction to their lives (i.e., meaning). Late adolescence is an important stage for the construction of narrative identity since it is a time when individuals begin to form a coherent and meaningful life story (McLean, 2005). However, researchers such as McAdams (2001) and Habermas and Bluck (2000) have highlighted the ongoing nature of narrative identity development throughout the lifespan, with significant contributions from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

### ***3.1.2 Narrative Identity and Well-Being***

The importance of constructing life stories in late adolescence has led researchers to focus on adolescent narrative identities. Research has explored the intersection between narrative identity and psychopathology in addition to other important areas (Shiner et al., 2021). The development of personality disorders is more likely in youth narrating a more negative story that is characterised by limited freedom of choice (Chen, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2020). Unfulfilled love, intimacy, and belongingness themes in adolescents' narratives tend to be associated with borderline personality disorder in later life (Lind et al., 2021). Moreover, adolescents suffering from schizophrenia-spectrum disorders are likely to have disorganised narrative structures and a detached narrative (Cowan et al., 2021).

Well-being is also intertwined with narrative identity. For example, researchers have shown that older adolescents who linked their actions and life experiences more closely with their identity reported better well-being (Chen, 2011). The opposite was true for younger adolescents (Reese et al., 2017). Research studies suggest that engaging in narrative processes during romantic high points can be associated with increased life satisfaction

among adolescents in college (Dunlop et al., 2019; Lilienthal & McLean, 2020). In the following section, autobiographical memories are discussed as the building blocks of a life story.

### **3.2 Autobiographical Memory**

An individual's life experiences shape their story and identity. Despite having numerous life experiences, it is impossible to recall all of them. Instead, individuals only remember a few selected events or periods (Fivush, 2011; McAdams, 2019). Indeed, Fivush (2011) explains that the process of constructing a life narrative involves filtering and organising memories based on personal relevance and emotional salience, which may result in the exclusion of some experiences. Therefore, it is likely that individuals will remember only a few selected events or periods that are meaningful to them in the construction of their life stories.

The narrator remembers experiences through autobiographical memory (Fivush & Haden, 2003; Josselson, 2009). Autobiographical memory is the recollection of events or images from one's life. Memory is made up of episodic memories (experiences with specific objects, people, and events at a particular time and place) and semantic memories (knowledge about the world) (Fivush, 2011). Often, the autobiographical memories that individuals recall are memories and images that are emotionally charged, for example, trauma and loss. While most images are fleeting, these autobiographical memories remain well into adulthood (McAdams, 2019).

In most cases, individuals can recall their earliest memories at approximately 3.5 years old (Reese et al., 2010). By the end of childhood, children whose parents talk elaborately about their past have more detailed autobiographical memories (Reese et al., 2010).

The factualness of memories does not matter (Nelson & Fivush, 2020). Memories are notorious for being distorted. Instead, it is more about how the narrator interprets the memories that shape the story (McAdams, 2015). Any event, however, can be explained or interpreted in several ways. The internalised narrative is, therefore, not necessarily an accurate reflection of the event. While a positive interpretation may be assigned to certain life events, the meaning of certain events may be negative for others (Nelson & Fivush, 2020).

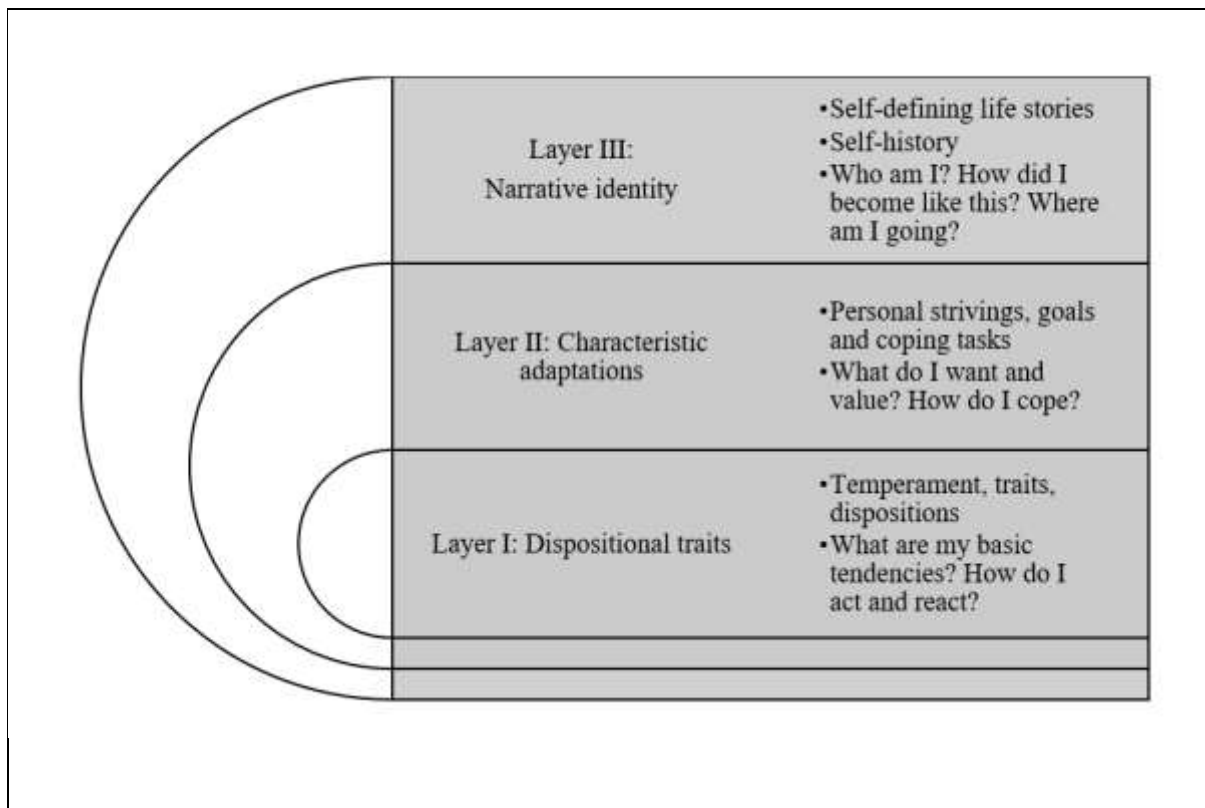
Although individuals share their life stories from a young age and particularly during late adolescence, they actively begin to reinterpret events in their past, present, and anticipated future (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Their evolving story starts providing clarity and a sense of direction in their lives (i.e., meaning).

It is crucial to note that studies have indicated that the bereavement experience can disrupt or alter autobiographical memory (Xiu et al., 2017). Research has shown that individuals who have experienced adverse life events or trauma, including loss, may have difficulties with overgeneral memory (the inability to recall specific memories from the past) (Nixon et al., 2013). According to other studies, people who experience complicated grief lose many of their rich and detailed memories (Maccallum & Bryant, 2013). Their memories of their lives are vague and general. However, their memories of the deceased are often vivid.

Sermpezis and Winter (2009) found that people with post-traumatic stress disorder provided more details about their traumatic experiences than those without post-traumatic stress disorder. Traumatic experiences offer reference points for organising personal life stories and become a central component of identity (Berntsen & Rubin, 2007; Sermpezis & Winter, 2009). In the following section, McAdam's (2015) model of personality development, life stories, and narrative identity are discussed in more detail.

### **3.3 The Development of Narrative Identity**

An extensive body of literature has evolved throughout modern psychology related to identity formation. A prominent theorist of identity, Erik Erikson (1968), stated that a critical task during adolescence is developing and nurturing a sense of who one is. In contemporary psychology, narrative identity is one of the most robust and comprehensive identity theories. Fundamentally, narrative identity theorists suggest that an individual's capacity to turn their experiences into a coherent narrative emerges from a developmental process that begins in childhood (Chen et al., 2012). Three overlapping pathways, or layers, eventually form a cohesive sense of self or narrative identity. These three layers are illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3***Three Layers of Narrative Identity Development*

*Note.* McAdams & Pals, 2006

As conceptualised by McAdams (2015), this figure illustrates that infants display temperaments from the beginning of life, which eventually evolve into dispositional traits that profoundly shape who they will become. Young children express these traits in their interactions with others, similar to an actor in front of an audience (McAdams, 2013, 2015). As they mature and receive increasingly more feedback from their social environment, children start to formulate goals and values that guide their behaviour in the future. Their goals and values reflect the distinct ways in which they respond to certain situations. The self eventually becomes an author of sorts during adolescence, carefully assessing their life's past, present, and future (McAdams, 2015). Their sense of identity reflects who they are, how they came to be, and what their future may hold. A more detailed discussion of these layers of personality development follows. A deeper insight into how individuals construct their life

stories can be gained by understanding how personality develops during childhood and adolescence.

### ***3.3.1 The First Layer: Early Childhood, Attachment, and Dispositional Traits***

The first years of life lay the foundation for whom a person will become and how they eventually tell their life stories. Therefore, early childhood is a crucial developmental period for forming a narrative identity (McAdams, 2013; Shiner et al., 2021). Researchers have indicated that the pre-school years are when the self becomes sufficiently complex, enabling the child to start structuring their memories (McLean & Breen, 2009). An important variable in remembering during these early ages is the adults in the young child's life. As adults talk and share their memories, a child learns which memories are worth recounting (Banks, 2013; Camia et al., 2021). A child's ability to remember is informed by how their parents elaborate on stories.

The memories that the parent scaffolds eventually become the building blocks of a young person's life story. These life stories, in turn, reflect a general feeling of optimism or pessimism, which is referred to as the narrative tone (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean & Pratt, 2006). Researchers have documented that narrative tone originates in the first year of life as the child forms an attachment relationship with their caregiver (Aytuğlu, 2018; Lind et al., 2020; Sugarman, 2004). These researchers have shown that secure attachments give the child a sense that the world is safe, trustworthy, predictable, and good. Hence, secure attachments generally lead to a sense of optimism. Secure attachments allow young people to expect positive futures even in adversity.

In contrast, children who experience difficulties in their early attachment relationships, which adverse experiences may bring about, tend to have a pessimistic tone in their narratives (McAdams et al., 2004). In their stories, the world is viewed as unpredictable, and the child sees positive events as too good to be true. Narrative tone, informed by their

attachment style, reflects the young person's assumptive worldviews (see Section 2.4.1.3). Narrative tone underscores the central role that attachment plays before the loss of a parent, which in turn will influence the tone of their life story post-loss (Aytuğlu, 2018). Securely attached young people tend to cope better with loss and trauma. Responsive adults who nurture secure attachments are thus critical in helping the child adjust to their loss.

Children's attachment styles set the tone of their life stories, but their temperament and core traits also play a role (McLean & Breen, 2009). Initially, the child's temperament (i.e., biologically based behaviour patterns) shapes their emotional reactions to the world around them (Shiner, 2012). Fundamental dispositional traits develop from their temperament, which correlates with the well-known Big Five personality traits. These traits are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Guo et al., 2016). Openness to experience is characterised by imagination, curiosity, and creativity, while conscientiousness reflects traits such as organisation, responsibility, and self-discipline. Extraversion is a preference for social interaction, assertiveness, and talkativeness, whereas agreeableness is characterised by cooperation, empathy, and trust. Finally, neuroticism refers to the tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and moodiness (Guo et al., 2016). Numerous studies support the notion that core dispositional traits inform the essence of a person's identity and personality. In other words, dispositional personality traits explain differences in how people narrate their lives (McLean & Fournier, 2008). In narratives, extraversion is positively correlated with a positive tone (McAdams et al., 2006). A study by Bauder et al. (2005) found that neurotic individuals perceive the past less positively than those who are less neurotic.

Conversely, those inclined to openness have more complexity in their narratives and tend to notice their growth when they interpret the past (Bauer et al., 2005). Dispositional traits influence the experiences that the child seeks out. A person's dispositional traits also

shape how an event is experienced and stored in memory (McLean & Fournier, 2008). Accordingly, a child's dispositional traits influence their autobiographical memory (recollections of the individual's life) and reasoning. Thus, a young person's dispositional traits will shape how an event such as parental loss is remembered. These concepts are discussed shortly.

### ***3.3.2 The Second Layer: Middle Childhood and Characteristic Adaptations***

McAdams (2013) described a second layer of personality, which explains that people have different motives, goals, and strivings. Furthermore, their values, beliefs, and expectations also differ. McAdams (2015) collectively refers to these aspects of one's personality as character adaptations. A child's core traits essentially direct what they consider important and valuable. These characteristic adaptations mean that children become more goal-directed and start experiencing personal power, especially as they enter middle childhood (Chen, 2011). Thus, they organise their lives around goal pursuits.

In McAdams' (2015) second layer, human agency is the focus. Young people begin to make unique choices, which inevitably drive their identity into being. A sense of personal agency and power also helps young people to understand their actions and those of others (McAdams, 2015). This emerging ability to understand the behaviour of other individuals is more commonly referred to by researchers as the theory of mind (Beaudoin et al., 2020). Children also become increasingly capable of regulating their own behaviour at the same time. Children can steer their behaviour and goals more easily during this development phase by asking themselves what they want. The goals of school-aged children may reflect their basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, according to Reis et al. (2000).

Agency is essential at this stage of young people's life stories (McAdams, 2019; Reis et al., 2000). They need to feel in control of their choices and behaviour. Providing young people with options is beneficial at this stage because it can contribute to their sense of

agency, which is essential for their psychological well-being and the development of a positive identity. Moreover, having a sense of agency may lay the foundation for a redemptive life story, which refers to a narrative that transforms a difficult or traumatic experience into a source of personal growth and meaning (McAdams, 2019). Thus, offering choices to young people can potentially help them to construct a cohesive life story that reflects their agency and resilience.

Competence refers to learning different skills and feeling in control of how things may turn out (Reis et al., 2000). It is more likely for a child to achieve their goals when they think they possess the skills that they need for success. In contrast, negative feedback decreases a child's sense of competence and intrinsic motivation. Competence is also linked to meaning-making (Bauer, King et al., 2019).

Relatedness refers to a child's need to be connected and attached to loving parents, family, and friends. Young people need more nurturing from their social environments than simple interactions (Shiner et al., 2021). Striving to have warm, empathetic, and supportive family and friends is essential as children share their life stories with others, and this can lead to a richer, more coherent narrative identity.

Children are more goal-directed during middle childhood and hence accrue more life experiences, shaping their narratives (Boswell, 2008). They also start to orientate themselves towards the future with their growing maturity. Thus, they learn to remember more experiences and think more about the past. As children develop autobiographical memory and language skills during middle childhood, they tell stories about the past events that they remember (Fivush, 2011; Reese et al., 2010). The adult scaffolds children's attempts at self-narration, filling in details as they speak and teaching them what is important to remember (Fivush, 2011). Children produce more intricate and coherent autobiographical memories from a developmental perspective when their parents (particularly mothers)

demonstrate an elaborative reminiscing style (Dunlop, 2022). This involves encouraging children to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about the event, asking open-ended questions and providing additional details. However, Fivush (2011) argues that cultural and contextual factors influence the way that parents scaffold autobiographical memory. For instance, in some cultures, storytelling is more focused on the collective family narrative, while others emphasise the child's personal experiences. Given the importance of parental reminiscing in developing children's life stories, it is crucial to consider the cultural and contextual factors that may influence this process. In doing so, a more nuanced understanding of how children develop a redemptive and cohesive life story after experiencing loss can be obtained.

In the context of this study, the critical role of adults in reminiscing and sharing stories and memories about the deceased parent is highlighted. In doing so, they may also indirectly support a continuing bond between the child and their deceased parent.

### ***3.3.3 The Third Layer: Adolescence and Narrative Identity***

During adolescence, youth have greater access to memories of specific events (Banks, 2013; McLean & Breen, 2009). As adolescents recall increasingly more memories, they also develop the cognitive ability to organise single events into a broader life story that is more coherent (Chen et al., 2012; Fivush & Haden, 2003). When children reach adolescence, they have a more intricate life story with a distinctive tone, characteristic of many emotionally charged mental images (Fivush et al., 2019). Adolescents progressively reconstruct past events from this repository of memories from their life history. As a result of their experiences, they are more likely to tell how they have grown. They also reflect on their current circumstances and anticipate a future for themselves. They try to make sense of the world in a way that has not been seen before (Shiner et al., 2021). A young male's well-being

is negatively affected in early adolescence when he makes stronger semantic connections; however, well-being improves when he moves into late adolescence (Chen et al., 2012).

Adolescents construct a life story that informs their identity by reflecting on themselves and their world. In the same way, Erikson (1968) proposed that identity is a sense of continuity across different social roles over time. Thus, as adolescents enter the prime of their life, their life story takes shape. A more apparent distinction is made between chapters, key scenes (highs, lows, turning points), main characters, and intertwined plotlines. Thus, their narrative identity becomes more apparent (McAdams, 2013). In constructing self-narratives, adolescents use several resources. These include cultural master narratives, family background, educational experiences, gender and role expectations, dispositional traits, and characteristic adaptations (McAdams, 2019).

Adolescents can also apply autobiographical reasoning, creating connections between the past, present, and future (McLean & Fournier, 2008 Reese et al., 2017). By linking memories across their lives, a sequence of events starts evolving with a particular theme (Singer et al., 2013). These memory themes, or scenes, form their life story and are psychological components of their personality (McAdams, 2015). Additionally, each scene has an emotional tone. Over time, the adolescent links the sequence of scenes together to form a 'script'. Scripts, in turn, are the guidelines that a person uses to predict, understand, respond to, and manage multiple scenes (Singer et al., 2013;).

An autobiographical memory can enhance a story's cohesiveness by enabling conclusions to be drawn (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The term implies that adolescents can draw meaning from their memories with the help of cognitive skills (McAdams, 2015). Researchers have pointed out that individuals are specifically drawn to making sense of emotionally challenging scenes in their lives, for example, loss. In doing so, they hope to learn from them and find redemption and meaning in their adversity (McLean & Breen,

2009). The cognitive skills of autobiographical reasoning enable a narrator to link events together. A conclusion and meaning can, therefore, be drawn. Increased reasoning and depth in regard to the processing of life events signal engagement with understanding oneself (McLean & Syed, 2016).

With their narrative identity becoming more crystallised, adolescents tend to form a personal ideology that reflects their sense of right and wrong (McAdams, 2015). Although initially superficial, this ideology becomes increasingly complex but does not shift dramatically in later adulthood. A significant amount of time is also spent by late adolescents creating and refining the main characters or images in their life stories. It is common for adolescents to have two central and often conflicting characters in their life stories (Guo et al., 2016). For instance, a late adolescent may have a central character of being a responsible student and achieving good grades but also have a conflicting character of being a rebellious teenager who engages in risky behaviours with peers, reflecting the ongoing process of identity formation (McLean & Pratt, 2006). These conflicting characters can create tension in the individual's life story, and the process of reconciling them reflects the ongoing struggle to integrate different aspects of their identity (McLean & Mansfield, 2012). Additionally, conflicts between different roles or identities (e.g., being a dutiful son while trying to assert independence) and different values or beliefs (e.g., wanting to fit in with a peer group while maintaining personal integrity) can also contribute to conflicting characters in the life story of an adolescent (McLean & Pratt, 2006).

Society endorses adolescents' optimistic, romanticised view of life. They are encouraged to view challenges as obstacles and to see the future as limitless. However, as late adolescents engage with life, there is a greater societal expectation for these emerging adults to accept disappointment and deal with failure (McAdams, 2013). Especially when young individuals are struggling to cope with trauma such as loss, narrating a positive story can be

challenging (Vanaken et al., 2022). An expectation that the story of one's life should be positive may hinder the dual process of coping with grief and bereavement (see Section 2.3.1) for a young person. Bereaved youth may feel pressured by society and their culture to maintain a positive attitude because they are expected to be happy and carefree (Chen et al., 2012). Adolescence may be the age when culture exerts its most profound influence on life narratives (Hammack, 2008). Furthermore, adolescents who have experienced the loss of a parent may be particularly attuned to the cultural narratives and values that shape their life stories. As they navigate this significant life transition, they may question the norms and values of their culture and seek out new experiences and perspectives that can help them make sense of their loss.

According to Hammack (2008), the stories that young people hear from their families, communities, and the media can have a significant impact on their own narratives.

Adolescents who have lost a parent may be particularly vulnerable to cultural narratives that emphasise the importance of self-reliance and stoicism in the face of adversity. However, they may also encounter narratives that emphasise the importance of community support and the seeking of help from others.

### **3.4 Narrative Coherence**

As the development of adolescents progresses, the way in which they construct their life stories becomes more intricate and sophisticated. They connect their autobiographical memories to develop a coherent and meaningful account with increasing complexity (Vanderveren et al., 2019). In this context, coherence refers to the quality of the narrative, which includes its overall structure, organisation, and meaning (Adler et al., 2018; Lind et al., 2020). This reflects the way in which adolescents shape and organise their life experiences into a meaningful and cohesive narrative that serves to shape their sense of self and identity. Furthermore, coherent narratives situate the story within a specific time and place and reflect

the narrator's thoughts, feelings, motivations, and values. When a narrative is coherent, people feel an improved sense of meaning, identity continuity, and purpose in life (Lind et al., 2020).

Several studies have shown that narrative coherence is associated with well-being. The coherence of adolescents' narratives often negatively correlates with their well-being during adolescence (Chen, 2011). Furthermore, over- and under-explaining traumatic events such as parental loss, the focus of this study, indicate psychological distress and loss of narrative coherence in constructing individual identities (Capella, 2017). Lind et al. (2020) found that better mentalisation (understanding one's own and others' mental states) contributes to narratives that are more coherent. In other words, narratives that are more coherent are associated with fewer externalising problems.

Habermas and Bluck (2000) identified different types of narrative coherence reflected in life stories. Temporal coherence is a type of coherence in which events are remembered coherently and are interconnected in time (Mitchell et al., 2020; Waters & Fivush, 2015). Therefore, the narrator temporally orders them. However, it is only possible to remember dates for a few highly significant events. Alternatively, events can be reconstructed in time based on contextual information if the narrator tells the story clearly and chronologically. Temporal coherence is more noticeable as children mature. For example, younger children often recount notable events in an unconnected manner. Young adolescents, however, embed events in predictable structures that create order in their lives (McAdams, 2019).

In causal coherence, a cause-and-effect relationship is drawn between story events and the sense of self as events unfold (Chen et al., 2012). Thus, causal coherence explains how the events throughout a person's life contributed to change and stability (Reese et al., 2017). External events or internal characteristics may explain the changes that the person has experienced. Causal coherence involves an interpretation process. Everyone strives to make

meaningful connections between events in their lives and their sense of self. Therefore, when links are not made, life is experienced as something with little meaning (Chen et al., 2012). The narrative complexity and references to lessons learnt and insights gained become more complex in adolescence. The complexity of a narrative is determined by the youth's ability to identify multiple perspectives, dimensions, or emotions (Grysmann & Hudson, 2010). They are more prevalent in turning-point narratives (Grysmann & Hudson, 2010). A turning point occurs when someone undergoes a significant change (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Losing a loved one is often a turning point in an individual's story. As a result, turning points are personal experiences that alter a person's life and narrative identity (Vanderveren et al., 2021). Life stories can be enhanced by allowing negative or challenging experiences to be included because disruptive events are generally more memorable.

Thematic coherence occurs when a sense of similarity in themes reflects a person's life experiences (Reese et al., 2017). Narrators reveal overall themes and create meaning through the evaluation of their stories. A more advanced cognitive skill is creating a theme for one's life. The presence of a theme across connections implies a reflection on the life lived (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Often, these themes are reflected in introductory or concluding statements of a person's life story or comments on turning points.

### **3.5 Content and Themes in Narrative Identities**

Researchers in narrative identity have identified key themes (also known as 'life story constructs' or 'thematic elements') in the narratives of individuals (Williams & Moser, 2019). The following constructs are coded when participants recount a personal narrative in research studies: agency, communion, redemption, and contamination (McAdams & McLean, 2013). An explanation of these themes follows.

### **3.5.1 Agency**

Agency signifies how individuals can influence and change their own lives and the lives of others (McLean & Syed, 2016). People are inclined to experience a high degree of agency by exhibiting self-mastery, freedom from psychological and societal constraints, accomplishments, or social standing. Stories high on agency signify a degree of triumph and the capacity to control one's destiny. Agency consists of four pathways (McAdams et al., 1996): (a) self-mastery (mastery, expansion, or improvement of the self), (b) status/victory (achievement of high status or prestige among peers), (c) achievement/responsibility (achievement in a particular task, job, or goal), and (d) empowerment (self-improvement through interaction with something other than the self). Themes of agency and redemption are highly favoured in individualistic cultures and are strongly associated with positive personality traits, psychological well-being, and a productive approach to adulthood (McAdams, 2019). The loss of a parent can initially be traumatic and sudden, leaving young people with a compromised sense of agency. Furthermore, Fivush et al. (2012) found that in general, female narratives include more agency themes than male narratives, especially regarding positive events, suggesting that females believe that they have more control over their lives than males. Personal narratives of males, however, emphasise themes of achievement more than the narratives of females.

### **3.5.2 Redemption**

Redemption occurs because of a 'bad' experience or circumstance that ultimately results in a 'good' or 'positive' outcome (Dunlop, 2022). Thus, a sense of redemption or liberation characterises the outcome. Adults who are socially engaged and healthy often describe their lives in a way known as the redemptive self (McAdams, 2005). People frequently share different types of redemption in their life stories (Booker & Perlin, 2021). These include sacrifice (e.g., significant effort resulting in good marks), recovery (e.g., a

serious injury heals faster than expected), growth (e.g., the death of a father brings family members closer), learning (e.g., harsh criticism improves the narrator's academic performance), and improvement (e.g., bad grades lead to academic progress). Dealing with adverse events such as loss seems to require more effort than positive events (McLean & Fournier, 2008).

Redemptive self-narratives also reflect prosocial behaviour and goals. Five themes emerge from these narratives: childhood advantage, empathy for others' suffering, moral steadfastness, redemption sequences, and prosocial goals (Guo et al., 2016). Redemptive stories that progress from bad to good are associated with positive emotion and well-being. They are also associated with extraversion. Researchers studied individuals with ambiguous loss and found that more contamination and fewer redemption sequences were present in their narratives (Huang & Habermas, 2021). The presence of more contamination and fewer redemption sequences in the narratives of individuals with ambiguous loss implies that their experiences are often characterised by unresolved feelings of grief, loss, and uncertainty. This may reflect the ongoing struggle to make sense of the situation and find meaning in the loss (Huang & Habermas, 2021).

### **3.5.3 Contamination**

Contamination refers to experiences that are deemed good and positive and that subsequently change and become negative (Adler et al., 2015). These narratives are often present in the face of trauma and when a person's assumptive worldview has been challenged (see Section 2.4.1.3). The antagonistic nature of the experience ultimately overpowers the previous positive experience (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The loss of a loved one is often described as a contamination narrative.

A contamination sequence has the narrator move from a generally positive to a generally negative state. When transitioning from one state to another, there is often a sense

of denial or the inability to remember what was good about the previous state. In addition to victimisation and betrayal, the contamination-related themes include loss, failure, illness, disappointment, and disillusionment (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Those with high neuroticism tend to tell negative and tense stories and use contamination sequences more frequently (Baddeley & Singer, 2008). A contamination sequence invokes sympathy, concern, discomfort, and confusion on the listener's part by orientating the listener to the seriousness of the narrator's plight (Baddeley & Singer, 2008). It is possible that late adolescent males who lost a parent in childhood and have high levels of neuroticism may be more likely to tell negative and tense stories, with frequent use of contamination sequences. This could potentially have an impact on their ability to process and cope with their loss effectively since negative storytelling has been linked to negative outcomes in bereavement. Furthermore, it is possible that the use of contamination sequences in their narratives may elicit sympathetic responses from others but may also contribute to feelings of discomfort and confusion, ultimately hindering the individual's ability to receive support and engage in healthy coping mechanisms.

#### ***3.5.4 Communion***

Individuals experience communion when they show or experience interpersonal connection. The connections happen through love/friendship (wherein the protagonist experiences a heightened degree of love, either romantic or platonic, towards another person), dialogue (wherein the protagonist experiences an intrinsically meaningful conversation with someone else), caring/help (wherein the protagonist helps or provides care for someone else), and unity/togetherness (wherein the protagonist experiences a sense of connection or kinship with a group of individuals or a collective of some kind) (Dunlop et al., 2019). As a result, intimacy, care, and belonging are the primary themes. A series of intimate friendships and relationships are formed as the story proceeds, demonstrating intimacy, belonging, and

affiliation. Common themes in communion are love/friendship, reciprocal and non-instrumental dialogue, the helping of others, and unity/togetherness. Fivush et al. (2012) found that both males and females talked equally about relationships in their autobiographical narratives, suggesting they are equally concerned with and focused on relationships.

There is a high level of agency and communion in the stories of agreeable individuals (McAdams et al., 2004). People who seek communion are more likely to prioritise their connections with others, especially in intimate relationships (Dunlop et al., 2019). Mroz et al. (2020) found that adults who experienced loss often shared stories of personal growth. There were more themes of communion in their narratives than in other challenging life events. According to the researchers above, individuals often reflect on deceased loved ones with reverence. Additionally, they recall close relationships with those who shared their loss with them to dispel loneliness (Mroz et al., 2020).

### **3.6 Meaning-Making**

According to McLean and Breen (2009), individuals make meaning from an event when they learn or deduce something significant, which in turn, allows them to interpret the event in a way that is personally meaningful and helps them navigate future experiences. This can range from finding no meaning to learning a valuable lesson or gaining a deeper understanding of life. Neimeyer and Thompson (1992) state that grief following a loss challenges individuals to reconstruct and reaffirm their world that has been left devoid of meaning. People adopt meaning structures that give them a sense of understanding in six domains. These include everyday tasks, perceptions of themselves and their identities, interpersonal relationships, anticipated future, spiritual or philosophic beliefs, and social engagement (Armour, 2003).

Regardless of its nature, loss changes a person's storyline. It forces them to reappraise their identity in the abovementioned domains and challenges them to deal with what they

have lost. With the loss, meaning-making involves processing the event of the death and reconstructing rather than relinquishing the relationship with the deceased (see Section 2.4.2). In later writings, Neimeyer and his colleagues state that individuals also find meaning in loss when they perceive advantages in the experience. However, only some individuals can benefit from their loss long after it occurs (Neimeyer, 2019; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2019).

Meaning-making implicitly suggests that the person must reappraise who they are, thus involving an identity change. Post-traumatic growth can also occur in this process, which reflects a redemption theme (Asgari & Naghavi, 2020). Researchers in this domain have illustrated that bereaved individuals become more aware of how fragile life is, demonstrating greater empathy, resilience, independence, and compassion towards others (Kayne, 2018).

Neimeyer (2019) states that individuals may find their newfound meaning beneficial. However, it may also make them more distressed, reflecting a contamination theme. Distress may initially elicit a search for meaning or serve as an outcome of meaning reconstruction.

Meaning reconstruction happens both intra- and interpersonally. As a result of their interactions, individuals form a structure that is made up of connections that are created, shaped, and maintained (Neimeyer, 1999). Narrating the memory can resolve the adverse effect of an experience, leading to meaningful insight into oneself (McLean & Fournier, 2008).

### **3.7 Role of Culture and Master Narratives**

When individuals tell their life stories, they share their personal experiences and reflect the culture in which they live. The following section discusses how cultural customs inform how a life story should be constructed. The discussion continues by exploring master narratives that reflect society's expectations, for example, how males should think, feel, and behave.

### ***3.7.1 Cultural Concept of Biography***

Cultural conventions govern how to construct a life story. The social customs and expectations dictate how a biography should be presented, how the less-remembered parts of childhood should be handled, and what the objective of the biography should be (e.g., demonstrating that one must lead a virtuous life) (Habermas, 2007). The structure of life stories is also determined by several landmark events (e.g. graduating, getting married). Therefore, developmental milestones and normative life events sequentially order the developmental timeline and social clock. As a result, there are expectations about when to finish school, when to start working, when to settle on a career path, when to get married, and when to reach the pinnacle of one's career (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). Normative transitions are also known as life scripts (Altunнар & Habermas, 2018). Life scripts play a significant role in selecting essential memories, not only because of their personal significance but also their importance to society. Most of these events in the life script fall into the late adolescence and young adulthood range (Habermas, 2007).

McLean et al. (2017) argue that research on identity development is mainly concerned with the individual and not the culture in which the individual is developing. Beyond the individual recalling their life experiences from a time perspective, culture also shapes their sense of how things should unfold (McAdams, 2013). Therefore, the order of life events is often informed by the notion that specific experiences should develop in a sequence across the lifespan (e.g., birth, transitions, and change in one's nuclear family, institution, and geographical location). When people deviate from this culturally endorsed template, they may have to construct an alternative identity (McLean & Syed, 2016).

Within a modern Westernised context, a person's identity is viewed as an individualised project or a narrative. The narrative identity of a person must be continually updated and rewritten to maintain self-continuity. Conversely, collectivistic cultures value

relationships more than individual life stories in defining identity (Eaton & Louw, 2000; Terblanché-Greeff, 2022). A collectivist culture may not require causal coherence in life stories (Altunnar & Habermas, 2018). Instead of focusing on an individual's personal journey and achievements, the emphasis may be on how their actions and decisions affect the larger community. However, it is essential to note that these are generalisations and that there is significant cultural diversity within Africa in addition to variations within different regions, ethnic groups, and individuals.

### ***3.7.2 The Master Narrative Framework***

Life stories reflect cultural master narratives that inform society's expectations, which individuals often internalise. McLean and Syed (2016) proposed a master narrative framework that describes the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society. As much as culture can support or constrain an individual, individuals can create, challenge, or sustain cultural ideologies.

Narrative identity is formed through master narratives, images, and metaphors that are familiar to one's culture and the general plotlines that are drawn from one's culture. Culture defines the dominant images, themes, plots, and meaning of the life stories (McLean et al., 2017; Syed & McLean 2022). Master narratives are cultural scripts that are readily accessible across various identities (McLean et al., 2017; Schiff et al., 2017). The master narrative describes how a particular community has traditionally construed its history and what its members can expect from their lives. Thus, a master narrative conveys an ideological message, validating a group's identity and setting forth what constitutes a good and admirable life (McLean & Syed, 2016). Identities, however, can also be constrained by culture. Culture exerts tremendous power over people and, therefore, oppression and its role should be considered. In society, master narratives form the structure, and those whose lives do not conform are structurally marginalised. One example of cultural oppression in South Africa is

the marginalisation of indigenous cultures such as the Khoisan people. The Khoisan have been historically oppressed and marginalised by colonialism and apartheid policies, which has led to the erosion of their traditional ways of life and cultural practices (Kloppers & Pienaar, 2014). As a result, the Khoisan people have been structurally marginalised and have limited access to resources and opportunities, including healthcare and education.

Another example of cultural oppression in South Africa is the stigmatisation and marginalisation of people living with HIV/AIDS. The stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS in South African culture has resulted in discrimination, social exclusion, and limited access to healthcare for those living with the disease (Kalichman et al., 2003). As a result, people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa have been structurally marginalised and have limited access to resources and opportunities, including employment and education.

In addition to providing valuable information about the group's history, goals, values, and identities, master narratives offer guidelines to individuals who identify with a particular culture or group. Therefore, the utility of a master narrative depends on how useful it is in defining what is considered acceptable and valued (McLean & Syed, 2016; Syed & McLean, 2022). Within a given cultural context, master narratives are universal or ubiquitous. There is familiarity among most members of the culture with the narratives or scripts that relate to the culture. Members of the group are intimately familiar with the outlines of the master narrative, even if they do not accept the narrative. For example, the males would be familiar with the culture's expectations of how they should think, feel, and act.

In most cases, master narratives are invisible. People in a culture become familiar with the master narrative subconsciously and automatically. Learning what it means to be a good member of a group or culture takes little effort (Syed & McLean, 2022). Until a person violates the narrative's norms or is exposed to alternative narratives that challenge the master narrative, the narratives remain invisible and implicit.

Additionally, master narratives establish an obligation. Their moral message informs people how they should feel, think, and act. People whose narratives do not align with these master narratives are likely to be marginalised by society (Adler et al., 2017; McLean et al., 2020). One example of master narratives shaping societal expectations and marginalising those who do not conform can be seen in the context of mental health. The master narrative of mental health stigmatises individuals who experience mental illness and portrays them as weak or dangerous, which can lead to social exclusion and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Those whose narratives do not align with this master narrative, such as individuals who openly discuss their mental health struggles, may face marginalisation and discrimination (Corrigan et al., 2010).

Another example of master narratives shaping societal expectations and marginalising those who do not conform can be seen in the context of gender. The master narrative of gender places expectations on individuals based on their biological sex, and those who do not conform to these expectations are often marginalised and stigmatised (Connell, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987). For example, transgender individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles and expectations may experience discrimination and violence (Grant et al., 2011).

There is also a marked rigidity in mastering narratives. A narrative identity can be articulated within a well-defined framework. However, the structure is not overly elastic. It often reinforces privileged societal positions or affirms deeply held values whose violation incurs high costs. For master narratives to maintain their rigidity, they must be used frequently (McLean et al., 2017).

Alternative narratives are constructed by those who deviate from the master narrative. Alternative narratives, however, are associated with a greater sense of engagement with one's

identity processes (McLean & Syed, 2016). In addition to providing a framework for marginalised people, alternative narratives may also influence cultural change.

### **3.7.3 Types of Master Narratives**

**3.7.3.1 Biographical.** The biographical master narrative prescribes how life events should unfold according to society. It specifies the type of events that should unfold at various developmental stages. The biographical master narrative may prescribe certain roles or responsibilities for individuals who have lost a parent. For example, in some cultures, adult children are expected to take on caregiving responsibilities for their surviving parent. People's life stories may either reflect this master narrative or deviate from it. Typically, the loss of a parent in a young person's life disrupts the sequence of how life events should unfold. Identity formation is more likely to occur when individuals elaborate on empowering alternatives to the master narrative (McLean & Syed, 2016).

**3.7.3.2 Episodic.** Certain historical events or episodes are told with great frequency. They are often told in the same way by other individuals, for example, the cultural master narrative of the coming of the New South Africa. The aforementioned narrative refers to the dominant story that emerged in South Africa following the end of apartheid and the democratic transition in the early 1990s. This narrative typically followed a redemptive sequence, which involved the resolution of conflict, reconciliation, and the establishment of a new and more just society (Baines, 1998). Episodic master narratives usually follow a redemptive sequence. As individuals define themselves, historical events may influence their identities (McLean & Syed, 2016).

**3.7.3.3 Structural.** Master narratives of structure refer to the overarching framework or template that shapes how individuals understand and construct their life stories. These narratives guide individuals in selecting which events to include in their stories and how to organise these events into a coherent narrative. They also prescribe certain themes and values

that should be emphasized in the story such as redemption, heroism, or overcoming adversity (McAdams, 2005).

A common type of master narrative in some Western cultures is the redemptive narrative, which emphasizes finding meaning and purpose in the face of tragedy or adversity. According to this narrative, difficult experiences can be transformed into opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery. This type of narrative can be seen in many memoirs and autobiographies, as well as in popular media depictions of real-life events (Booker & Perlin, 2022; McAdams, 2005).

However, these master narratives can be limiting as they may not accurately reflect the experiences of all individuals. For example, individuals who do not fit into the dominant cultural narrative may struggle to construct a coherent life story that aligns with their own experiences and values. Additionally, these narratives may overlook the complexities and nuances of individual experiences and may pressure individuals to conform to societal expectations rather than exploring their own unique perspectives (McAdams, 2005).

### ***3.7.4 Gender as a Master Narrative***

Society constructs numerous master narratives around gender and how individuals should perform (Fivush & Grysman, 2020). Hegemonic masculinity is a particular master narrative that informs, encourages, and constrains boys to conform to these socially sanctioned dominant male norms (Levant, 2011). An example is the refusal to acknowledge weakness and rather overcome adverse circumstances and display courage and strength. Hegemonic masculinity also discourages emotional expression and help-seeking. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) propose that it is not easy for males to embody such a form of masculinity, which stipulates that men follow a prescribed, idealised set of norms that are not necessarily reflected in their daily lives (McVittie et al., 2017). For example, hegemonic masculinity can complicate the ability of adolescent males to adjust and construct their

narrative identities when they are constrained in expressing loss-related feelings. Without reflecting on their feelings, adolescent males may find it difficult to explain how the loss of their parent affected their lives. Therefore, finding meaning in the event may prove challenging for these individuals.

The Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP) (Levant, 2011; Pleck, 1995; Richmond & Levant, 2003) provides valuable insight into how the master narratives of hegemonic masculinity constrain males. Based on the social constructionist theory of gender roles, the GRSP holds that gender roles are psychologically and socially constructed. Accordingly, the GRSP conceptualises male distress as a reaction to cultural pressure on males to conform to traditional notions of masculinity rather than as an intrapsychic or interpersonal disorder (Levant, 2011). The GRSP distinguishes between the three forms of the male gender role strain (Richmond & Levant, 2003). First, the discrepancy strain occurs when gender role expectations are violated. For example, an adolescent male who enjoys fashion or dancing instead of traditional masculine activities such as sports or hunting may feel a sense of discrepancy between his interests and the societal expectations of how boys should behave.

Second, the dysfunctional strain can be experienced by males who conform to the masculine role or hegemonic masculinity. However, their expression of hegemonic masculine behaviours, similar to emotional constriction, can cause psychological harm and strain. For example, males who strictly adhere to the ideal of emotional restraint or 'toughness' may struggle to express their emotions or to seek help when they need it. This can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety, and can negatively affect their overall well-being and life story.

Third, the trauma strain describes the experience of specific gender roles as being especially harsh, for example, for male athletes and gay males (Richmond & Levant, 2003). The trauma strain of gender role strain theory describes the experience of specific gender

roles as being especially harsh for certain groups of individuals. For example, male athletes and gay males may experience trauma as a result of gender role expectations (Richmond & Levant, 2003). Male athletes are often expected to embody a certain type of masculinity that is associated with physical toughness, emotional stoicism, and aggression. These expectations can lead to a variety of negative consequences, including physical injuries, emotional burnout, and substance abuse. Additionally, male athletes who do not conform to these gender norms may face discrimination, harassment, or bullying from their teammates or coaches, which can further exacerbate their trauma (Richmond & Levant, 2003).

Moreover, gay males may experience trauma as a result of being stigmatised or discriminated against based on their sexual orientation. In many societies, being gay is still seen as deviant or abnormal, which can lead to social exclusion, verbal or physical abuse, and even violence. These experiences can be particularly traumatic for gay males who internalise these negative messages and feel ashamed or isolated as a result. Moreover, some gay males may struggle with identity issues and self-acceptance, which can further compound their trauma and lead to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Richmond & Levant, 2003).

Emslie et al. (2006) found that the males in their study had developed masculine ways that challenged the hegemonic discourse. These participants defined their expression of masculinity as a positive feature and highlighted their creativity, sensitivity, and intelligence. Therefore, generalisations about depressed males always remaining silent are inaccurate. Rather than resisting culturally dominant definitions of masculinity, many males find it more useful (and perhaps less threatening) to reinterpret potentially feminising experiences as masculine. Levant (2011) states that as adolescent males question gender ideologies and become aware of how they have been restricted, the underlying patriarchal structure weakens.

### 3.8 Parental Loss, Narratives, and Life Stories

This chapter explained that the life story of a late adolescent is a dynamic and evolving account of their past, present, and future. A life story provides these adolescents with a sense of identity and a sense of direction for the future. Moreover, a person's life story is not static but ever changing and evolving (Banks, 2013; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2013). Researchers and psychologists can gain insights into an adolescent's development and well-being by understanding their narrative identity. Their narrations also reflect their life stories in a larger context where society and individuals reciprocally interact to shape identities and broader societal norms and values.

The building blocks of any life story are the autobiographical memories of events, past, present, or what others have told the person about these events (Fivush, 2011; Fivush & Haden, 2003). How memories are remembered is influenced by an array of interpersonal factors (e.g., dispositional traits, goals, attachment styles, historical losses). In addition, the social context will influence the content and the way in which events are remembered and narrated. Most importantly, in the intermediate and long term, psychological health depends on how events are coherently integrated into the life story (Habermas & Paha, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2006; Waters & Fivush, 2015).

Losing a parent may set in motion an array of changes to one's life story that may challenge a coherent and cohesive life story. How the deceased parent is recalled in autobiographical memory will depend on whether the young person remembers the parent. In some cases, the parent may have passed away early in the young person's life and, therefore, they may not have episodic memories of the parent. Similarly, a young person may not have been old enough to remember their parent's death.

A young person will encode and recall autobiographical memories based on having had a lived experience of the parent (and their death). Alternatively, the person may only

have narratives about the parent as told by others. In the first instance, a young person may experience significant grief based on an attachment rupture in the wake of the parent's death. In this case, it is also possible that parental loss will result in their assumptive worldviews being shattered. Depending on inter- and intrapersonal factors and the circumstances surrounding the death, these individuals may see the world as unpredictable, chaotic, meaningless, and unsafe. A young person's life story can be contaminated by loss (especially traumatic loss) if assumptions are shattered (Captari et al., 2021; Janoff-Bulman, 2010)

Over time, a young person can process the loss and integrate the event into their narrative identity, with the theme of the life story moving from contamination to agency. Initially, young individuals may experience loss-orientated stressors but in time, may transfer to restoration-orientated stressors as they orientate themselves with the task of daily living. From a narrative identity perspective, the oscillation between loss and restoration stressors can be facilitated if the young person is provided with a warm, attentive, empathetic listener as they share their experiences and feelings related to the loss. Research supports the idea that one way of making sense of difficult experiences, which in turn may lead to cohesive narrative identity in one's life, is by sharing and expanding one's life story (Baddeley & Singer, 2008; Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; McLean, 2005; Reese et al., 2017). With ample opportunity to share loss narratives, young individuals can elaborate on the event of parental loss, and this can provide closure. Furthermore, they can draw positive meaning from the loss more effectively and reduce distress over time. The more that people tell a story, the more likely it is that the possible anger and sadness related to the event will subside in the long term (Pasupathi & Adler, 2021).

However, in a society that discourages males from expressing their feelings or silences conversation around loss, young individuals may not have the opportunity to talk about their loss. This could be especially detrimental to a male adolescent with a more

intuitive grieving style. Furthermore, the surviving parent's compromised mental health may also hinder conversations about the loss within the family environment. Without the opportunity to tell their story, young people are also deprived of the opportunity for exploratory narrative processing, which is the process of engaging with personal stories in a flexible and open-ended manner and with a willingness to consider alternative perspectives and outcomes (Pals, 2006). Hence, they may not fully integrate their loss experience into their evolving life story.

Similarly, a young person who may not have any episodic memories of their parent also needs sufficient opportunity for conversations in which memories of their deceased parent are shared. A parent and child reminiscing together is one of the processes in which the life story develops (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Reese et al., 2020). The surviving parent thus plays an essential role in keeping the memory of the deceased parent alive, which can help a young person integrate the loss of that parent into their life story.

Reminiscing and encouraging a person to share their life story has the advantage of facilitating an exploratory narrative process whereby the narrator actively explores, reflects on, or analyses a problematic experience in order to learn from it and incorporate it into the story (Pals, 2006). From superficial exploration to developing a complex understanding of self, the story conveys the extent to which it is about the individual's self-discoveries.

The core personality trait of openness may facilitate exploring challenging experiences through narrative processing (Guo et al., 2016). Individuals with this disposition are open to and tolerant of complicated feelings and thoughts (rather than being against them) (Pals, 2006). Additionally, Fivush et al. (2012) found that adolescent females tend to narrate more elaborate, coherent, reflective, and agentic narratives than adolescent males. As a result, male adolescents are less likely to engage in exploratory narrative processing than female adolescents.

As a cohesive and coherent life story evolves with parental loss integrated into the overall life story, the young person can maintain a continuing bond with their deceased parent. Thus, young people do not have to detach themselves from their parents but instead, can carry them throughout their lives. Klass and colleagues (1996) found that these continuing bonds are not static. On the contrary, they evolve and mature with the person so that the individual can relate to their deceased parent at various ages through a different lens.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed narrative identity concerning parental loss. As a highly emotive life event, parental loss due to death is bound to feature in the stories of bereaved late adolescent males. Many factors will influence how they will remember and subsequently tell their story of loss, including personal and relational factors. Various features of narrative identity, including narrative coherence, and typical themes found in narratives were discussed. Lastly, the role of master narratives within the broader culture was outlined. This research study aimed to understand better how parental loss shaped and influenced the developing narrative identities of adolescent males. The research methodology that informed this study is unpacked in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology

*“Qualitative research records the messiness of real life, puts an organising framework around it and interprets it in some way.”*

(Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 42)

The previous chapters discussed parental loss in childhood and its influence on the development of narrative identity among late adolescent males. The literature review presented the background and the context that informed the research questions. This chapter discusses the rationale, purpose, and aim of the study. The research design, methodology, and approach is also addressed. A description of the research participants and the sampling procedure follows. Thereafter, the methods of data collection and analysis are reviewed. Chapter 4 concludes by considering the trustworthiness and ethical considerations relating to the study.

### 4.1 Research Aim and Questions

Individuals’ narrative identities influence how they understand themselves, what they aspire to achieve, and how they act (Adler et al., 2016; McLean & Breen, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2020). Events such as a parent’s death often alter an adolescent’s life narrative. These life events can hinder the development of life stories and identity in three ways (Neimeyer et al., 2006). First, it may diminish an individual’s ability to generate a coherent life story following a traumatic event. Second, a life story focused on the traumatic event may constrict other narrative identity possibilities. Third, traumatic events may be excluded entirely from the life story. In the face of life-challenging events, adolescents also tend to tell life stories characterised by contamination narratives.

Although researchers have highlighted narrative identity construction during adolescence, limited research has been done on how parental loss influences the process of

narrative identity construction. Very few researchers have considered how adaptation to such a disruptive life event in childhood can shape and inform identity in the later adolescent years. Furthermore, researchers have neglected several cultural factors such as the influence of gender on narrative identity development in the context of loss.

It, therefore, remains unknown how late adolescent males construct their narrative identity in the face of childhood parental loss. Consequently, this research study aimed to reveal more about the thematic elements in the life stories of late adolescent males. Apart from identifying thematic elements, how well the narrative resolution was integrated into recounting their lives leading to a cohesive narrative identity was considered. Four research questions were explored:

- How do late adolescent males construct and narrate their experience of parental loss?
- How do late adolescent males experience the bereavement process, oscillating between loss-orientated and restoration-orientated stressors?
- What narrative themes and subsequent meaning-making emerges from the life stories of late adolescent males?
- How have gender-informed norms shaped the narrative identities of late adolescent males following the loss of a parent?

#### **4.2 The Research Paradigm**

In conducting social research, researchers use empirical scientific methods to acquire knowledge. To be deemed scientific, a research method must address the research question in a meaningful and informative manner. As a result, the philosophical foundations must be conceptualised before establishing a research method (Mouton, 2001; Silverman, 2018; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Thus, researchers do not merely become technicians who have

the skill and knowledge to conduct research, they enter the space of philosophy and theory (Kim, 2016).

Researchers follow certain research paradigms that guide their research activities and methods. Philosophical beliefs about reality (ontology), theories of knowledge that inform the research (epistemology), and the methods regarding how that knowledge is acquired (methodology) are referred to as research paradigms (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tuli, 2010).

#### ***4.2.1 Ontology***

The ontological dimension in social research pertains to the nature of the social reality that is being investigated and how researchers and participants understand it (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Bleiker et al., 2019). A fundamental question in ontology is whether reality is objective and independent of human interpretation or whether it is constructed through human interaction and meaning-making. Different research traditions may adopt different ontological assumptions, but it is not accurate to present them as mutually exclusive or opposed. For example, positivism emphasises objective, empirical reality and aims to identify causal relationships using scientific methods, while interpretivism-constructivism recognises the role of subjective interpretation and meaning-making in shaping social phenomena and emphasises the importance of understanding social realities from the perspectives of those involved (Creswell, 2012; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, these positions are not inherently opposed and can coexist and complement each other in practice, depending on the research questions, methods, and goals. One of the most debated dimensions is the positivist-interpretivist/constructivist continuum, which is discussed further below.

Positivists believe that a universal reality is guided by laws and can be measured (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Park et al., 2020). Thus, positivists use mainly quantitative approaches to measure and predict human behaviour. According to positivist theorists, the

goal is discovering scientific explanations. An interpretivist paradigm was conceived as a response to the imposition of positivistic paradigms on social life (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Kamal, 2019). Interpretivists, instead, try to understand the meaning that individuals construct out of their experiences. To do so, interpretivists interpret individuals' lived experiences through the lens of history, language, and culture. By observing a social context, interpretivist researchers seek to understand and formulate theories about the group or community that they are studying.

Similarly, constructivists believe that individuals and groups socially construct reality (Gergen, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 2016). The mind does not discover knowledge and truth but instead, creates it. Therefore, there is no single truth but rather multiple realities. Schwandt (1994) states that “contrary to common-sense, there is not a unique real-world that pre-exists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language” (p. 236). Constructivism also holds that reality does not exist independently of people. Hence, it cannot be discovered but is interpreted instead (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Researchers who follow a constructivist paradigm explore the various constructions of reality. They consider how individuals are constructed by reality and are constructors of reality. Unlike positivists, they do not try to determine the causes of a phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). Researchers can gain a deeper understanding of people's perceptions and knowledge by employing a constructivist approach.

Constructivism and interpretivism share similarities and differences in how they approach the examination of the social world (Gergen, 2020; Schwandt, 1994). Both perspectives share the view that meaning is created and negotiated by individuals, and both aim to understand the lived experience of individuals. However, constructivism places more emphasis on language and interaction as mediators of meaning, which distinguishes it from interpretivism (Pham et al., 2018).

Researchers following a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm usually use a qualitative approach to understand how people interpret their experiences. This current qualitative study aimed to explore how late adolescent males construct meaning following parental loss. Furthermore, the aim was to understand better how parental loss can inform and shape the narrative identity of young males. The interpretation of parental loss by male adolescents was thus foregrounded.

#### ***4.2.2 Epistemology***

Epistemology focuses on how knowledge is acquired, what it comprises, and how the knower and the known are related (Mendieta, 2013; Smythe & Murray, 2014). In other words, epistemology refers to what can be considered sound, trustworthy, and adequate knowledge in a specific situation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). An interpretivist, epistemological perspective was adopted in this qualitative study. As an epistemological position, interpretivism aims to grasp the subjective meaning of an individual's experience (Bryman, 2012). To understand better how individuals construct knowledge based on their social context, an interpretivist lens is used. Using an interpretivist lens, participants' stories are often understood through an inductive approach (Bryman, 2012; Neuman, 2013). As part of an inductive approach, observations are sought and patterns are explored. On the contrary, a deductive approach focuses on collecting and analysing data to test hypotheses derived from a theory. Inductive and deductive approaches can be used simultaneously in qualitative research designs such as narrative inquiries (Azungah, 2018; Sharp et al., 2019).

Interpretivism also considers how individuals acquire knowledge (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pham et al., 2018). People understand themselves and the world through interpretative processes that are subjectively and culturally embedded. In other words, there are many accounts of the truth that are rooted in social and cultural contexts. Any knowledge constructed from research must always be considered within the context in which it

originated (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). What is true varies across context and time. In other words, what is known reveals where and how that knowledge was constructed and produced.

Researchers using an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm often explore research problems that are not clearly defined (Gergen, 2020). Therefore, the research is conducted in order to understand the existing research problem better; however, the research will not provide conclusive findings. This type of research is also known as exploratory research (Swedberg, 2020). Results from exploratory research can provide insight into the meaning that participants assign to their life experiences, which have bearing on the contexts in which they occur.

Table 2 summarises the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm that was employed in this study. The remainder of this chapter discusses the research approach, strategy, and methodology in more detail.

**Table 2***The Interpretivist-Constructivist Paradigm*

<b>Qualitative Approach (Interpretivist-Constructivist Paradigm)</b>			
<b>Ontology</b>	<b>Epistemology</b>	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Strategy</b>
The concept of reality. What is reality?	The search for reality. How and what can we know about reality?	What is the approach to understanding reality?	How to discover reality
Reality does not exist independently (constructivism). An individual or group socially and contextually constructs reality.	Knowledge is constructed and must be interpreted (constructivism)	Inductive	Qualitative Narrative inquiry
<b>Qualitative Approach (Interpretivist-Constructivist Paradigm)</b>			
<b>Methodological Choices</b>	<b>The Goal of the Research</b>	<b>Results</b>	<b>Researcher's Role</b>
Which tools can be used to discover reality?	What is the aim of the research?	What type of data and findings is produced?	What position does the researcher take?
Qualitative with a semi- structured interview Life-story interview	Exploratory Understanding	Meaningful Contextual	Interactive Cooperative Participative

*Note.* Adapted from Bryman (2007) and Creswell et al. (2007)

### 4.3 Research Methodology

Ontology and epistemology are interdependent and inform specific approaches, strategies, and methodologies. In addition to organising the research, the methodology also appraises the researcher about practices that facilitate the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The methodology in this study was a qualitative approach using a narrative inquiry research design (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Dewart et al., 2020; Mertova & Webster, 2019; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

A qualitative approach is recommended when a problem or issue needs to be examined in depth. As a result, researchers can gain a better understanding of a phenomenon. Therefore, qualitative research is used when a researcher wants to determine what people do, know, think, and feel (Azungah, 2018; Miller, 2017; Patton, 2014). This type of research does not produce comprehensive data but rather a narrow set of detailed accounts from a few participants. These accounts are rich, thick descriptions that explore the patterns of meaning (Creswell et al., 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In qualitative research, researchers do not position themselves as impartial and objective. Instead, qualitative research encourages the researchers to be personally involved with the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). A collaborative relationship is consequently of central importance, especially in narrative inquiry. Throughout the research process, the meanings of experiences are discussed with participants and validated (Holmes, 2020; Haydon et al., 2018).

Qualitative research further holds that researchers cannot ignore their own experiences because these inform the essence of their interpretation of the research. Etherington (2007) encourages researchers to identify explicitly the lens through which they interpret the literature and the data. Qualitative research relies heavily on the

researcher as the primary tool of inquiry. This subjective awareness of the researcher is also known as reflexivity (Josselson, 2007; Reid et al., 2018). An essential tool for understanding the experiences of participants under study is reflexivity. Throughout the research process, it uncovers the impact of the researchers' role and their commitment to acknowledge how they contribute to each stage (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Tracy, 2010).

Similarly, positionality is a researcher's understanding of the world that is shaped by their opinions, values, and experiences (Holmes, 2020; Fenge et al., 2019). The researcher's positionality shapes research in all aspects. These include the topic to be studied, how subjects will be selected, how questions will be structured, when and where the study will be conducted, and where and how the results will be released (Holmes, 2020). Therefore, researchers need to review their positionality in order to understand how it may influence their study. The reflexive stance (p. xxii) included in the opening section of this study is an attempt to disclose those factors that could have affected this study. The subsequent trustworthiness section provides more information on engaging with researcher reflexivity.

#### **4.4 Narrative Inquiry**

Different qualitative research designs outline how researchers can collect, analyse, and interpret data. A specific qualitative design (i.e., narrative inquiry research design) was selected for this study. By composing narratives of a limited number of people, the design collects data and contemplates the meaning of these narratives (Butina, 2015; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2012; Kim, 2016). Using this design, researchers can learn better from participants by listening to their stories. Therefore, stories or narratives form the study's essential raw data that is at the heart of the narrative inquiry. A narrative

inquiry should also consider the qualities and characteristics of the narratives (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007).

#### ***4.4.1 The Nature of Narratives***

People tell stories about their experiences to communicate with others. They can thus be considered natural storytellers. Atkinson (2012) support this:

We are the storytelling species. Storytelling is in our blood. We think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through story. Our life stories connect us to our roots, give us direction, validate our own experience, and restore value to our lives. Life stories can fulfil important functions for us, and, as we recognise now more than ever, everyone has a story to tell about his or her life, and they are indeed important stories. (p. 224)

According to Smith and Sparkes (2006), narratives play a central role in people's lives. According to these authors, narratives serve as an essential source of psychosocial learning and influence people's lives in the present and future. As a result, narratives are a portal through which people enter the world; they help guide their actions and are a psycho-sociocultural resource that constitutes and constructs human reality (Mendieta, 2013).

Telling stories is, therefore, an essential part of the human experience (Newitt et al., 2019). A person's life stories are situated within a specific time sphere. They are told from the perspective of the reconstructed past, the perceived present, or the anticipated future. Additionally, when people narrate their life stories, they only tell a partial story of their lived experiences (McAdams, 2015). Narratives are, therefore, incomplete to a certain extent. It would be unimaginable for a person to relate every detail and recollection of their life. People select only certain parts and leave out others; this is referred to as 'narrative choice' (Adler et al., 2017). Even these recalled memories are reconstructed and are

reflective of the narrator's interpretation. For example, the current study focused on understanding how past childhood experiences such as parent loss are recalled and reconstructed in the face of parental loss. Furthermore, the study explored how these recollections shape the identity of late adolescent males in the present and how this, in turn, informs their imagined future selves.

Stories are not mere objects that the narrator produces. The stories that participants share with the researcher do not reflect the objective reality of the participant. Instead, telling one's story constructs a subjective reality (Nelson & Fivush, 2020). As participants tell their stories, they convey meaning to themselves and others and form their identities in the process (Hendry et al., 2018; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Brennan to Letherby (2017) argue that identities are constructed through repeated tellings that shape people's sense of selfhood and identity. Narratives, therefore, do not reflect an objective reality of de-contextualised facts; instead, narrators construct a story to convey its meaning from their subjective perspective (Wang & Geale, 2015). Furthermore, the broader social discourses and contexts also shape the story (Zilber et al., 2008). There are thus multiple layers that shape and inform the story. According to Spector-Mersel (2010), people have a great deal of freedom in terms of telling their stories. However, people's freedom to tell them is limited by the contexts in which they do so. When considering the stories people tell researchers, it is essential not to conceptualise them as accurate recollections of the narrator (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Instead, these narratives should be seen as being shaped by the participants' social, cultural, institutional, familial, and linguistic narratives.

#### ***4.4.2 Narrative Inquiry as a Method of Research Inquiry***

A narrative inquiry is characterised by an interest in people's experiences (Dewart et al., 2020). Researchers can, therefore, use a narrative inquiry to retell a participant's life story. It involves studying a small number of individuals and exploring their experiences in

depth (Josselson, 2007; Spector-Mersel, 2010; Wang & Geale, 2015). A narrative inquiry has different focal points. For example, it focuses on the phenomenon of interest, in this case, the experience of losing a parent. Simultaneously, the narrative inquiry focuses on the methodology used, including the methods used to analyse the stories told by the participants. It is, therefore, crucial that the researcher considers the storied experiences as both the phenomenon under investigation and the method of inquiry into them (Clandinin et al., 2016).

With its focus on individual experience and the context in which narratives are told, narrative inquiry primarily focuses on listening and retelling people's stories (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). The retelling of the stories takes place in the three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and location (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Dewart et al., 2020).

The concept of temporality emphasises that researchers inquire into life experiences as they occur over time. A narrative inquiry emphasises experiences chronologically (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Mertova & Webster, 2019). Moreover, sociality indicates that stories are located within people's personal and social conditions (Caine et al., 2013). Specifically, personal conditions refer to peoples' moral dispositions, reactions, feelings, hopes, and desires. Similarly, social conditions include the environment, people, relevant factors, and dynamics that form part of each person's context. Thirdly, the location refers to the physical boundaries of the place(s) where the inquiry occurs. In retelling a participant's narrative, temporality, sociality, and location must be considered (Mertova & Webster, 2019).

Re-storying—a process in which researchers restate the story in their own words—is a distinguishing element in a narrative research process (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Schiff et al., 2017; Wang & Geale, 2015). The researchers retell the participants' stories while

keeping the narrative elements in mind. These include the setting, characters, actions, problems, and resolution. Narrative inquiry researchers also identify the themes or the categories that emerge from the stories that are told (Newitt et al., 2019). Consequently, the data analysis often includes the story description and the themes that are actively constructed by the researcher. A story's themes add complexity. They also provide insight and depth into the individual experiences.

As a research method, narrative inquiry provides insight into how researchers can conceptualise the relationship between themselves and the participants (Haydon et al., 2018). Narrative inquiry emphasises a collaborative relationship between the listener and storyteller (Spector-Mersel, 2010; Wang & Geale, 2015). According to Souza (2003), collaboration occurs when the researcher and the researched exchange knowledge and experience. Although researchers' understanding of what has been studied will always be incomplete, cooperation with research participants can allow researchers to compare and modify their perceptions of the research so that the research has a shared meaning and a complete understanding (Heilmann, 2018). Stories are, therefore, not merely captured and retold by the researcher. Narrative inquiry is unique, and researchers who use it can enable participants to understand the experiences that they need to make sense of in their lives (Mertova & Webster, 2019). It invites researchers to think with rather than about stories that signify "a process in which we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as of allowing a narrative to work on us" (Morris, 2002, p. 196).

#### ***4.4.3 Type of Narrative Inquiry***

Narrative inquiry takes on various forms. It is, therefore, essential to consider the type of narrative study that one intends to conduct when planning a narrative inquiry. For every type of narrative, a different structure and method are provided for the study. Creswell (2012) poses five questions to assist researchers in determining the type of

narrative study to use: 1) Who tells the story? 2) How much of life is captured and presented? 3) Who provides the narrative? 4) Is a theoretical lens being used? and 5) Is it possible for narrative forms to be combined?

Answering these questions provided the framework for this study. First, the study was positioned in such a way that the participants themselves would give the stories. Participants were interviewed using the Life Story Interview (Atkinson, 2011), which is discussed below. Considering how much of the participant's life would be recorded and presented, the aim was to provide a story of each individual's life. Turning points and significant events in the participants' lives were also included. In addition, theoretical frameworks were used to understand the experiences of each individual late adolescent male and their grief experiences.

The deeply personal and subjective experience of losing a parent in childhood lends itself well towards a detailed description of an individual's experiences (Neimeyer, 1999). Hence, a narrative inquiry seemed appropriate, considering that such an inquiry respects the sensitive nature of sharing one's life story with a researcher. The inquiry thus emphasised and encouraged a robust researcher-participant relationship characterised by trust, empathy, and authenticity.

Furthermore, the intention was to understand this disruptive life experience that unfolded over time and influenced identity. Because these stories followed a sequence of events (i.e., followed a chronological order) it made the narrative research approach most fitting. Furthermore, the data should not be reduced to de-contextualised, generalised findings. A detailed account of the constructed life story should be provided. Bochner and Riggs (2014) note that "in the human sciences, we are supposed to be studying people, observing their lived experiences, and trying to understand their lives, and narratives come closer to representing the contexts and integrity of those lives than do questionnaires and

graphs” (p.198). It was also crucial to give voice to the stories of these males; the narrative approach facilitated understanding the participants’ experiences through their stories.

#### **4.5 Recruitment, Sampling, and Participants**

According to Johnson et al. (2020), qualitative research aims to make sense of the lived experiences of selected individuals in a natural setting. There is a tendency for sample sizes to be small in qualitative research (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Finlay, 2009). Therefore, generalisations are not critical in this type of research and should not be made (Devers & Frankel, 2000).

A narrative inquiry uses purposive sampling to include the most relevant participants in the appropriate context to answer the research question. According to Johnson et al. (2020), researchers recognise that some participants will possess more information or insights than others and are more relevant in achieving the purpose and answering the questions of the qualitative study.

Participants were selected based on characteristics using non-random, purposive sampling. This type of sampling requires a clear understanding of the population that the researcher wishes to study (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; Watts & Stenner, 2005). Hence, there is a deliberate selection of participants in purposive sampling. Using inclusion criteria, this selection ensures that the data sources are optimised, which assists in answering the research question (Johnson et al., 2020).

The inclusion criteria in this study were language (English speaking), age (late adolescence, 15–19 years old), gender (self-identified males), currently in psychotherapy, experience (loss of a parent between birth and 14 years old) and time (parental loss not less than one year ago). The language criterion was selected to ensure clear communication between the researcher and the participant. The age range was chosen because narrative identity, the focus of the current study, tends to emerge more fully during late adolescence

(Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean, 2005; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Singer, 2004; Thorne et al., 2004).

The criterion relating to experience was chosen in order to select only individuals who had lost a parent in childhood (below the age of 14 years). Because the loss would have been early in the formative years, sufficient time would have passed, allowing participants to oscillate between loss and restoration stressors, to construct meaning (albeit in an elementary form), and to form a possible continuing bond with their deceased parent. Specifying age criteria for when the loss occurred possibly provided unique insight into the intersection of childhood loss, identity construction, and meaning-making. Losing a parent within the last year may not have given the individual sufficient time to process their grief. By including participants who had lost a parent more than a year ago, it is more likely that they would have engaged in loss and restoration stressors and meaning-making.

Lastly, including participants who were in psychotherapy ensured that most participants would have already been through the process of giving voice to their loss. Additionally, it would have minimised the risk of participants feeling emotionally drained during or after the interview through speaking about their loss. Psychological assistance was available to the participants should they have needed it.

The researcher contacted colleagues who were registered educational psychologists in independent practice in Johannesburg, Gauteng in order to identify individuals in their practices who met the inclusion criteria. Educational psychologists typically provide expert knowledge and skills concerning learning and developmental difficulties across the lifespan (Health Professions Council of South Africa, 2017). The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the educational psychologists and requested that they inform these individuals and their legal guardians about the study by providing them with an information leaflet (Appendix A). After identifying possible participants, the psychologists

provided their parents with the research study flyer (Appendix B) and a promotional video (Appendix C). Thereafter, the psychologists obtained consent from the parents to distribute their contact details to the researcher (Appendix D). The potential participants were then referred back to the researcher, and informed consent was obtained from them (Appendix F) and their parents (Appendix E). The inclusion criteria and the capability of the individuals to express themselves during semi-structured interviews were considered. The willingness of the potential participants to participate in the study was also considered. A selection process was conducted in which participants who seemed motivated to explore the topic were selected. Seven participants were selected. Their biographical information can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Biographical Information of Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Current Age</b>	<b>Age at Parental Loss</b>
Participant 1: Oliver	16 years	5 weeks
Participant 2: Harry	19 years	14 years
Participant 3: John	16 years	14 years
Participant 4: Michael	17 years	9 years
Participant 5: Benjamin	15 years	6 months
Participant 6: Bandile	18 years	2 months
Participant 7: Ishan	15 years	10 years

#### **4.6 Data Collection**

The process of narrative inquiry involves gathering information for research through storytelling. In the current study, the Life Story Interview (Appendix G), initially developed by Atkinson (2011), was used to help participants narrate their life stories. The

Life Story Interview is a methodological approach that aims to collect sensitive narratives that illustrate how an individual has constructed and reconstructed their life (Atkinson, 2011). The interviews invite participants to describe and evaluate the events in their lives (Alea, 2018) rather than merely asking the participants to reconstruct the events. As a result of the participant's words, a first-person text can be constructed, and this may be examined through any theoretical lens in order to address the research question.

The interview has many benefits. For example, first-person narratives, which the Life Story Interview generates, can be constructive in gaining better insight into how the self evolves. Using open-ended, reflective questions helps the storyteller to develop their subjective meaning of the story (Atkinson, 2011, 2012). It also provides insight into the story's context (Freeman, 1992). A Life Story Interview can be used to gain a holistic understanding of someone's life rather than focusing on a single experience (Josselson, 2007).

In keeping with the constructivist nature of the current study, the Life Story Interview has much to offer. In contrast to objective-orientated accounts, the constructivist approach emphasises the context of the conception of the life story (Kamal, 2019). The Life Story Interview allows the researcher to collaborate with the participant so that personal, subjective meaning can be sought. Often, meaning is constructed through the researcher-participant relationship as the life story is narrated and unfolds.

There are three stages when conducting a Life Story Interview as a data collection instrument (Atkinson, 2011, 2012). First is the planning stage, which is also known as the pre-interview. A clear understanding of why a life story can be beneficial to understanding research phenomena is essential here. In order to understand how parental loss has changed each participant's perception of past, present, and future, it is crucial to see it as an ongoing experience rather than as a one-time event. Furthermore, it was necessary to have

participants speak for and about themselves in their own voice. Participants also needed to narrate their story from a perspective that allowed them to see their life holistically as it fits together or discontinuously throughout time. Considering the abovementioned reasons, the Life Story Interview was selected as the most suitable and beneficial instrument to understand the narrative identity of each participant in this study better.

Before interviewing the participants, the Life Story Interview was slightly edited by adding a question prompt that was related to parental loss (see Appendix G, Question 2d). According to Atkinson (2012), Life Story Interviews can be conducted under any methodological circumstance with specific research questions embedded within them and the questions designed to collect the full life story of participants.

The second stage comprises the actual interview process. Participants were interviewed individually using the Life Story Interview (Appendix G). These interviews took place at the researcher's office. However, because of transport difficulties, two participants who resided at a childcare centre could not travel. Therefore, the researcher conducted the interviews at this centre in a private space. Due to the lockdown restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the interviews was conducted online via ZOOM. Each interview typically lasted for one hour. While using the Life Story Interview as a guide, the researcher recorded the participants' life stories on audio and provided guidance throughout the process.

During the interview, participants discussed their life chapters, key scenes in their stories, challenges, personal ideologies, and life themes. Participants also had the opportunity to tell their stories within an empathetic relational space, which further assisted them in making sense of their reconstructed past, perceived present, and imagined future. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for the narrative to flow and to be connected.

#### **4.7 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data, when analysed, allows researchers to understand and comprehend the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Within the analysis of narratives, clarifying and exploring the personal, individual meanings that participants attribute to their experiences is essential. Here, the researcher analyses the participants' meanings and communicates them to an academic audience (Bamberg, 2015). In addition, the researcher must interpret the stories in order to understand the underlying narratives that the storytellers may not be able to convey (Riley & Hawe, 2005). Because the analysis was subjective, the results were not given the status of facts but rather descriptions of an experience.

Narrative researchers have published various guidelines and processes and have generated four approaches to analyse narrative data (Reissman, 2008). Narrative analysis can be broken down into four types: (a) thematic, (b) structural, (c) dialogic/performance, and (d) visual. Thematic narrative analysis, the first and most common form of narrative analysis, was used in the current study. Here, the primary focus is the themes that can be constructed from the narratives (Bamberg, 2015). Rather than an exact process, thematic narrative analysis is more of an approach.

Collecting data and the first elementary data analysis is often a simultaneous activity. At the outset of the analysis process, the data were organised and prepared to make sense of them. The researcher needed to immerse himself in the data in order to gain additional insight into the posed research questions. Braun and Clarke (2021) assert that themes are not pre-existing entities that need to be uncovered. Instead, they are actively created through engagement by the researcher, referred to by Braun and Clarke (2021) as 'thematic discovery'. Through interactive engagement with the sections that provided

additional insight into the research questions, the themes were actively constructed during the thematic discovery process.

Immersion was achieved by transcribing the digital recordings verbatim shortly after the first interviews were conducted with each participant. Participants' names and any identifying information was replaced or removed. Following a repeat reading of the first interview transcript of each participant, the researcher noted anything that was considered interesting or important in regard to what each individual participant had said. In this way, the researcher became familiar with the data of each participant's story (Azungah, 2018). Transcripts were re-read to identify recurrent words, ideas, or patterns, also known as 'codes'. Based on detailed, line-by-line notes on the data, these codes were then subjected to further analysis and construction, and this established themes that reflected the participants' patterns of meaning. Direct quotations from participants conveyed the themes that were identified.

An overview of the analysis in which all the themes were combined in a structure was provided. As a result of these final themes, a comprehensive and logical narrative was created that described the core of the participants' experiences. After determining the structure, a narrative account was written. The story of each participant was written with a relevant quote from the interview. A discussion of the themes in their narratives was also provided.

Thereafter, the salient themes across all the interviews were foregrounded. The data analysis sought to emphasise not only the unique themes of each participant but also themes that cut across the participants. "Individual life experience is simultaneously in some ways like no one else's (unique), in some ways like some others', and in some ways like everyone else's (universal)" (Atkinson, 2012, p. 8). The salient themes were identified by considering the individual themes of each participant's narrative and grouping them

based on recurring, essential, and main salient themes. A comparison could be made between the individual narratives for each salient theme based on similarities and differences.

#### **4.8 Trustworthiness**

Researchers need to be honest in how they carry out their research and judicious in the inferences they make (Pratt et al., 2020). This honesty is known as the trustworthiness of the study. Trustworthiness within a narrative inquiry research design has been controversial since its inception (Loh, 2013). A narrative inquiry seeks to acknowledge human experiences as being in a state of change. Therefore, it does not attempt to view stories as objective data that can be categorised and generalised into general laws (Hendry et al., 2018; Wang & Geale, 2015). In a narrative inquiry, the aim is not to replicate the study (Šula et al., 2015) but to reveal the meanings of the individuals' experiences.

To ensure a study's quality it is possible to demonstrate that the data and their interpretation, and the methods used can be trusted. It is nearly impossible to show that findings from narrative inquiry can be duplicated and generalised (Johnson et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2017; Patton, 2014). Nonetheless, Loh (2013) asserts that narrative inquiry must adhere to the trustworthiness criteria in order for qualitative research to be considered trustworthy. Various authors outline criteria that can be used to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research results (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly, 2016; Tracy, 2010). These criteria are discussed below.

##### **4.8.1 Credibility**

Credibility conveys that the results are true and correct (Šula et al., 2015). The findings generated from a study can be considered credible if they are congruent with reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, credibility can be extremely difficult to determine in narrative inquiry. Reality is highly subjective, and participants merely provide the

insights and meanings that they subjectively ascribe to their experience (Šula et al., 2015). Despite this, conditions were established to demonstrate that the phenomena central to this study were correctly recorded.

Specific measures to develop consistency in the participants' narratives were employed to establish credibility. These measures were also used to confirm the participants' interpretations of their reality and to explain previous comments with new information, especially if they appeared dissimilar (Loh, 2013). This was achieved through repeatedly listening to and reading the interviews and transcripts. Participants were requested to provide as much detail as they could. Loh (2013) states that "the truth is in the details, and narrative researchers need to seek the specific details in the narrative conversations" (p. 9).

Credibility was also established by sampling seven individuals to serve as participants (Connelly, 2016). To ensure that the data collection sessions included only those who were sincere about participating and providing information, each participant was allowed to refuse participation in the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason.

To collect and analyse data, researchers are encouraged to practise reflexivity and to recognise their biases (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Knox & Burkard, 2009; Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2010) also refers to reflexivity as sincerity when determining the quality of a study. According to Tracy (201), sincerity is being honest and transparent about one's biases and goals, and the influence of these on the research method. A reflective commentary was entered into the researcher's journal throughout the study. In addition to providing commentary on the techniques used, the researcher also commented on their effectiveness. In addition to comments on the patterns constructed from the collected data, the reflective

commentary also included the researcher's initial impressions of each data collection session.

As soon as interviews are concluded, researchers are encouraged to record their notes to optimise correctness. In the current study, these notes were recorded in the researcher's diary (see Appendix H). A detailed and complete set of notes results in valuable data that can be used in data analysis to enhance rigour in interpretation (Mulhall, 2003).

Finally, an attempt was made to determine whether the results of the current study were consistent with previous investigations by comparing them with earlier findings (Šula et al., 2015). An essential criterion for evaluating qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to relate the findings to existing knowledge.

#### ***4.8.2 Transferability***

The transferability of findings refers to how they can be applied to similar situations in other studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, generating transferable results from a single study is unlikely because it ignores the importance of context, which is essential to qualitative research. Braun and Clarke (2013) state that qualitative research "focus[es] on knowledge as something that comes from, and makes sense within, the contexts it was generated from, qualitative research does not assume the 'same' accounts will always be generated every time, by any researcher" (p. 42). In qualitative research, there is little possibility of determining whether the findings and conclusions are applicable in other situations (Carcary, 2009) because of the small sample sizes that are often used. Furthermore, it is impossible to generalise the findings because all observations are demarcated by contexts (Shenton, 2004). Despite this, a reader's context could be similar to this study, and as a result, they could relate the findings to their situation. Therefore, a specific attempt was made to provide the necessary contextual information relating to the

participants and other important factors. Accordingly, confidence in applying the results and the conclusions presented here can be considered in various contexts.

#### **4.8.3 Dependability**

The varying nature of the phenomena researched in qualitative work renders it impossible to produce comparable results (Connelly, 2016; Šula et al., 2015). This is true even if the same methods and participants are used in the same context (Shenton, 2004). However, any attempt to explain the credibility and to ensure dependability adds to the academic rigour of the research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To demonstrate dependability, the research design must be reported in detail so that future researchers can replicate the study to achieve the same results. This chapter explained the research design in detail, which contributes to the dependability criteria mentioned by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

#### **4.8.4 Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the measures taken to ensure that the study's findings are consistent with the participants' experiences and ideas (Fusch et al., 2018; Šula et al., 2015) and do not reflect the preferences of the researcher. Here, reflective commentary can be employed to restrict investigator bias. It is important to note that narrative research is not necessarily concerned with factually correct narratives or with authenticity of facts (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). Rather than focusing on experiences recalled by participants in this study, the researcher is interested in learning how those experiences are interpreted. As Polkinghorne (2007) states,

Storyed evidence is gathered not to determine if events happened but about the meaning experienced by people whether or not the events are accurately described  
 .... Storyed texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories. (p. 479)

As a reference, the actual transcribed interviews of participants are provided.

#### **4.8.5 Verisimilitude**

The verisimilitude of narrative inquiry is an essential criterion for determining its value (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is considered an integral component of trustworthiness within a narrative inquiry. It refers to academic writing as being ‘real’ or ‘true’ (i.e., plausible). The narrative reader should thus be able to relate to the story; it should resonate with them (Finlay, 2021). Furthermore, the reader should also be capable of understanding the participant’s decisions and emotions. “When the narratives are well crafted, it permits insights, deepens empathy and sympathy, and aids in the understanding of the subjective world of the participants” (Loh, 2013, p. 10). Various authors refer to resonance as a way to reverberate and affect an audience meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2010). A deliberate effort was made to present the study in an evocative way, encouraging the stories of the participants to be relatable.

#### **4.8.6 Utility**

Utility refers to the relevance and usefulness of the study. Hence, “research should be aimed at producing knowledge that contributes to the problem-solving capacities of some group of people” (Hammersley, 2008, p. 244). A study can be helpful when it facilitates a deeper understanding of phenomena that may have previously been perplexing. It also deepens and broadens the reader’s experience by highlighting specific directions they may not have been considered before (Loh, 2013). Moreover, narrative inquiry presents and clarifies participants’ realities to a broader audience through detailed descriptions of their lives (Wang & Geale, 2015). Readers can gain a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences through this knowledge. They may also be able to apply some of these insights to their contexts. The assumption is that participants can reveal compelling insights that may illustrate psychological experiences and processes. By doing

so, researchers can gain an insider's perspective and a deeper understanding of what experiences mean to participants. It is not about revealing truths but unveiling the subjective reality and meanings for participants within their respective contexts.

#### **4.9 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical conduct signifies the importance of how certain moral principles inform the research process. Wang and Geale (2015) state, "Ethics in narrative research is a set of responsibilities in human relationships: responsibilities for the dignity, privacy, and well-being of the participants" (p. 197). The ethical guidelines proposed by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2008) were adhered to throughout this study. The researcher was also granted ethical approval by the Research Committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of the Free State to conduct this study. Furthermore, the conduct of the current study was cleared and approved by the General Human Research and Ethics Committee (GHREC) at the University of the Free State (see Appendix I) based on ethical considerations. The additional ethical principles that were considered and their application to the study are discussed below.

##### ***4.9.1 Beneficence and Non-Maleficence***

According to Bifarin and Stonehouse (2022), beneficence can be defined as the act of performing good deeds for others and providing them with care. Non-maleficence refers to the obligation not to cause harm to others in any way. The nature of qualitative research is studying the lives of others. Therefore, researchers cannot fully anticipate the research's influence on participants or any unintentional harm. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) encourage researchers to be mindful of what they call 'relational responsibility', which considers the highest good for participants.

People may find it distressing to describe the loss of a parent (Cook, 2009). Societal attitudes and attitudes towards studying death-related subjects may also have a bearing on

whether or not individuals are willing to discuss loss-related topics in a research project. The researcher was, therefore, aware that some participants may have found it distressing to speak about their loss (Park et al., 2020). In addition to understanding the risks, researchers must also be sensitive to the potential benefits for participants (Cook, 2009). In this study, it was helpful for participants to share their personal stories from the perspective of their own experiences and to talk about their losses.

Participants in studies of loss and grief often believe that they are helping researchers to understand the grieving process better, thus benefiting other bereaved individuals. However, many university ethics boards believe that ignoring participants' painful experiences rather than encouraging them to discuss the experiences with an empathic listener is more beneficial to the participants (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Therefore, the researcher must establish a safe environment in which participants can recount and express the emotionally stressful events of their lives. By employing empathetic listening skills, the research interview can become a positive experience for the participant. Should the participants of the current study have found the interview distressing, psychological assistance was offered. Participants could consult with a psychologist of their choice for a debrief session (in which the researcher would not participate), with the researcher covering any costs recommended by the current regulating bodies. No referrals had to be made for participants in this particular study.

Owing to the nature of this research, harm was also minimised by selecting participants who were in treatment with a psychologist. Participants were told to inform their psychologist if they experienced distress during the research process. In such a case, the primary researcher would cover the cost of one psychotherapy session (in line with the recommended tariffs stipulated by HealthMan).

#### ***4.9.2 Fidelity and Responsibility***

In psychological research, the ethical challenge lies in respecting the individual while reporting to an academic audience. Accordingly, the principle of fidelity and responsibility requires the researcher to be as trustworthy and responsible as possible in order to retain the participants' trust. There is an ethical obligation to respect those being studied and to be mindful of their dignity, privacy, and well-being. This often conflicts with the scholarly responsibility to be truthful, authentic, and interpretive. Thus, the narrative researcher needs to establish a relationship with the participants that is authentic, genuine, respectful, and empathetic. In all probability, when rapport and trust are established, the nature of the information disclosed will be of a much higher quality. The data generated thus reflect the extent to which the participants were open and self-disclosing, which relates to how they have experienced trust within the relational circumstances of the study.

Some ethical dilemmas can arise in the writing of a research report. Ethically, when writing about the lives of other people, researchers must show respect and exercise appropriate tentativeness (Park et al., 2020). Researchers must keep in mind that what they write may be read by the participants. The authority given to researchers to interpret a participant's experiences and publish this point of view is a significant responsibility that requires care and consideration (Josselson, 2007). Researchers must be fully aware that what is eventually published could be distressing to the research participant. The risk regarding this interpretative authority given to the researcher pertains to the experiences not always being reflected as the participant would have wished. The task of a narrative researcher, however, is to convey the meaning of a person's story in a way that will be understood by a larger audience of academic colleagues (Smythe & Murray, 2014).

Critics of narrative research are concerned about how participants might respond. It may be unsettling for participants to read about themselves from someone else's perspective (Park et al., 2020; Smythe & Murray, 2014). A similar experience can be had by looking at a picture of oneself or listening to one's voice on tape. The most ethical approach was explaining to the participants that what the researcher would write would depend on his general conclusions about their group. To avoid revealing their identity, participants were also requested to exercise caution in informing others about their participation in the research study. In this study, measures were taken to omit as much identifying information as possible to protect the participants' identities.

#### ***4.9.3 Integrity***

To maintain research integrity, all research must be conducted in a way that others have confidence and trust in the methods and findings (Reid et al., 2018). In other words, it refers to the scientific integrity of the research that has been completed in addition to the researcher's professional integrity. Therefore, to establish a high level of trust, the researcher must communicate high transparency and honesty. To ensure integrity, all stakeholders were informed of the purpose and design of the study at the outset.

The researcher contacted colleagues to assist in the selection process by identifying individuals in their practice who met the inclusion criteria. Colleagues were informed of the purpose of the study (Appendix A). They were asked to identify potential participants and were requested to inform these individuals and their legal guardians about the research using an information leaflet (Appendix B) and promotional video (Appendix C). Thereafter, the psychologist obtained the parent's consent to distribute their contact details to the researcher (Appendix D). The researcher then contacted the legal guardian and the possible participant to obtain informed consent from them both (Appendix E and

Appendix F). As an essential aspect of the study, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

#### **4.9.4 Respect**

Respect for people's rights means that researchers must ensure that participants' privacy, confidential information, and autonomy are respected (Park et al., 2020; Reid et al., 2018). Many of these principles were informed by the ethics board. The confidentiality of the research participants was always ensured. During the transcription of the interviews, anonymity was maintained by omitting personal information. In most research, narrative interviews, field notes, and research journals should not reflect the name or identifying information of any participant. Josselson (2007) mention that participants

generally refer to family members, friends, or close associates by name, or they refer to places where they lived or companies where they worked, they could still be identified by someone who came across or read, for example, the interview text, unless every proper name in the interview is changed. (p. 538)

Exceptional care should thus be taken to protect the identity of participants within all the data being generated. This will prevent the participant from being identified by a third party. In the current study, all identifying particulars were removed from the transcripts (see appendices J–P). Digital recordings and verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were also conducted. All records and research will be kept securely for five years.

Because of the potential economic risk, the participant's parent(s) / legal guardian(s) were provided with a R200 e-wallet to compensate for any travel expenses to the primary researcher's consultation rooms or for loss of work time. Compensation is not an incentive for participation in research and is not provided as a result of the direct cost of participation but as a result of the overall inconvenience and effort expended (Afkinich &

Blachman-Demner, 2020). The same authors state that being involved in the study should not burden families with costs that they would not otherwise incur.

#### **4.9.5. Justice**

Justice means that researchers should conduct research with fairness and social equality (Park et al., 2020). Furthermore, to ensure fairness, it is crucial to select participants based on research needs rather than convenience (Singh, 2015). Participants should be guaranteed equal opportunities by following the inclusion and exclusion criteria in the research protocol. This study specified strict inclusion criteria for its participants (see Section 4.5). Moreover, participants were from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Furthermore, no segment of the population was unduly burdened by the current research. Research results will likely benefit the participants, even if this is not immediately evident.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a brief overview of the qualitative research design and methodology. Furthermore, it explained why this type of research was chosen for the current study. The chapter also discussed narrative inquiry and its significance to the study. Narrative inquiry can provide unique perspectives and deeper understandings of a situation while giving voice to populations whose views are rarely sought. The role of the researcher in narrative inquiry and the context and setting in which the participants participated were also examined in this chapter. In this chapter, the research process was outlined, focusing on thematic narrative analysis. Criticisms, limitations, and ethical considerations regarding the design and methods were provided. Chapter 4 concluded with a discussion of the study's trustworthiness. In the following chapter, the findings are discussed.

## Chapter 5: Results

*“There is no one-size-fits-all narrative; everyone’s path winds in different ways.”*

Sarah McBride

The purpose of this chapter is to present the themes that were constructed from the participants’ life stories as narrated in the individual interviews. The themes that were identified for each of the cases are discussed individually in the following section. Following the presentation of the individual themes is a discussion of the salient themes constructed from all the cases.

### 5.1 Individual Narratives

In the following section, the narratives of the participants are presented. Direct quotations are used to support the underlying themes. Two numerical values appear at the end of each participant’s quotation. These values represent the participant’s name (e.g., Participant 1) and the place number of the participant’s responses (e.g., Response 12). Each participant section begins with a summary of the relevant background information in order to help contextualise the participant’s story. Thereafter, the themes that were identified in each narrative are presented.

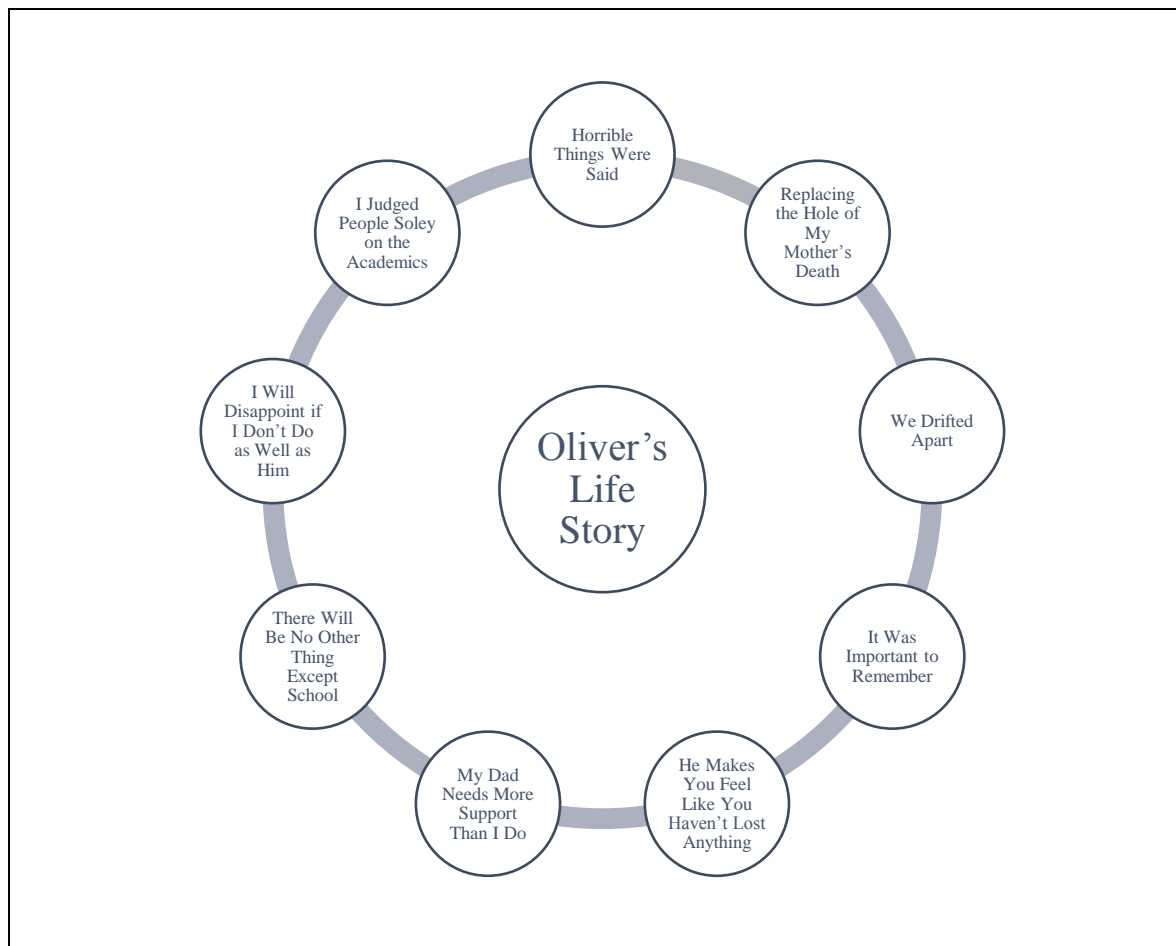
#### 5.1.1 Oliver: *“There Will Be No Other Thing Except School”*

Oliver is a 16-year-old white male. He is currently in Grade 11 and lives with his biological father, a single medical professional. Oliver has lived in Johannesburg all his life. During the first meeting with Oliver, he came across as a polite and thoughtful young man. Oliver was very cooperative during the interview, although he appeared guarded in what he revealed to the interviewer. It seemed that he chose his words carefully. Nevertheless, he told his story chronologically and clearly.

From the outset of the interview, Oliver spoke about his mother. She died unexpectedly when he was five weeks old. This event, however, does not feature as a prominent theme in his narrative. Instead, he shared the story of his mother's passing casually, matter-of-factly. Because of the early age at which he lost his mother, he has had to rely on stories about her from others. It was also clear that Oliver did not clearly understand what had resulted in his mother's death. For example, he shared how the pathologist's autopsy report could never definitively establish the cause of her death.

**Figure 4**

*Visual Display of Oliver's Narrative Themes*



**5.1.1.1 Horrible Things Were Said.** Oliver's arrival in the world brought much joy to his parents and extended family. It was a joyous time, but soon the excitement was overshadowed by deep sorrow and grief. At the young age of only five weeks, Oliver's

mother suddenly and unexpectedly passed away, leaving his family, particularly his father, in a state of shock, confusion, and sadness. His father was widowed and had the daunting task of raising Oliver alone.

In the weeks and months following her death, it was evident that tension was brewing between Oliver's father and his mother's family. Family relationships became strained, as is often the case after losing a family member. Oliver shared stories of what can be considered multiple non-death losses in the aftermath of his mother's passing. For example, his maternal family became more distant due to a family conflict related to his mother's death. Soon, he and his father lost contact with Oliver's maternal side of the family, and he would never see them again. He described this event as follows:

*My [name of family member] blamed him [my father] for somehow her [my mother's] passing. They did an autopsy and everything, and then there were court cases trying to take me away from him—a lot of horrible stuff. Horrible things were said. Uh, she was very manipulative. So she manipulated her entire family, and they chose her side over my dad. She accused him of pushing them away, which was not true. Because why would a single father push away a family when he needs them most in such a stressful job environment? So, it's traumatic for him. For me, I was unaware.*

Oliver shared how he could only imagine how difficult this time must have been for his father. Having to deal with the loss of his wife, he also now had to come to terms with being blamed for her death. One can only imagine the emotional burden he had to carry while attending to a young infant's needs.

**5.1.1.2 Replacing the Hole of My Mother's Death.** Oliver frequently stated that his childhood was “normal” and “happy”, especially in the “beginning”. He recalled positive childhood memories involving spending time with his loved ones and family.

Early in the interview, Oliver described how he experienced significant emotional support from the women in his family when growing up. Oliver expressed that he grew up surrounded by strong females after his mother died, for example, his paternal grandmother. They fulfilled the supportive maternal roles in his life, and he described these women as independent and strong. Some of his early memories revolved around images of his grandmother pushing him in a pram. These women ensured that he had a rich childhood filled with enriching activities and hobbies such as swimming, tennis, and piano lessons. Oliver felt that the influential women in his life normalised his youth, despite having experienced a significant loss. For him, many of the female characters were substitutes for a mother. Oliver explains, *“I think my grandmother and my aunt and my other grandmother in a sense replaced what the hole of my mother’s death left”*.

For support, Oliver’s paternal grandmother, a significant figure in his life, lived with them after Oliver’s mother had passed away. Soon after Oliver started pre-primary school at six years old, his father embraced the new roles and responsibilities in the home environment, and his grandmother subsequently moved to live with his cousins.

**5.1.1.3 We Drifted Apart.** Oliver shared how he loved his paternal grandmother and how she played an essential role in his earlier life. However, in 2021 when Oliver was in Grade 10, his grandmother died after suffering from a neurodegenerative disease. As time had passed, her forgetfulness had increased, and despite having had a close relationship with his paternal grandmother after his mother’s death, their relationship had changed over the years. Oliver mentioned the following: *“We drifted apart, but she [my paternal grandmother] wasn’t constantly in my life anymore. She was more in my cousin’s life. So maybe, I think they felt her, the loss of her presence more than I did. Sure, but still very sad”*. Oliver described his grandmother’s funeral as a traumatic low point despite the

distant relationship. He alluded to the similarity between his grandmother's funeral and his mother's funeral. Oliver described his memory as follows:

*... as we sat down, and they put a beautiful picture of her... it was very—and I started crying, and it was very striking to see her. She was young. She was very attractive, and so it was very sad. And yeah, my dad gave a speech. I didn't want to cry. I didn't cry then because I didn't want to make him cry. It's funny, when my mom died, my dad says through the chapel windows, the sun shined on the coffin. Same thing happened. So, it was very beautiful.*

**5.1.1.4 It was Important to Remember.** In the interview, Oliver mentioned that remembering his loved ones seems to help him cope in life. He relies on his father to tell his mother's stories, helping him to remember who she was. He recalled how he recently paged through the many photo albums that his family kept, looking at photographs of his parents. Oliver reminisced about his father talking to him about his mother. Through his father's stories, his mother is kept alive. Oliver explained, *“He called her a model, and they were very close and beautiful, and they went everywhere together. And it was comforting to know, you know, what their relationship was like”*.

Oliver believes that reminiscing about the past helps him to experience the sadness of who and what he has lost. He mentioned,

*In like the grieving process, um, with my grandmother, grandfather, mother, it was important to remember, [to] go through all the tears and all this. And I rely on my dad for this because we've been, we've always been first. So, I rely on him to like just remember memories, and then cry past it and overcome it and then just have all the memories, the happy place, and look back on those when sad.*

There is no doubt that Oliver believes that these memories and stories help him to realise that he can move forward in his life without living in the past.

**5.1.1.5 He Makes You Feel Like You Haven't Lost Anything.** During his formative years, Oliver's father played a pivotal role in his upbringing. Oliver portrayed his father as a parent who has consistently been hands-on and involved in his life, perhaps sometimes to the extent of being overinvolved. Furthermore, he described his relationship with his father as becoming increasingly close and supportive as time passed. His father took full responsibility for raising him.

In some ways, Oliver similarly fulfilled an emotionally supporting role for his father. They have a close relationship overall and support each other. One of the key high points in his life reflects a moment of being together with his father in nature. Oliver described the moment as follows:

*I don't remember where we were hiking to, but we were crossing a river, [a] beautiful river, lovely scenery, lots of birds. And my dad was pointing out birds as we went and flowers. And we had stopped. We had brought lunch with us. So we took it out, and we were both sitting. We took off our shoes and dipped our feet into the water, and it was very nice. We didn't talk much. I was listening to nature, admiring the view. There's a very nice moment.*

Nevertheless, Oliver wished that he had both of his parents in his life. Despite the absence of a mother, Oliver experienced his father as someone who tried to normalise Oliver's childhood by not making him feel different. He went on to explain,

*I strongly believe that obviously two parents are preferable. But if you have one parent who puts in as much effort as my dad has into making your life as a child and as an adolescent feel normal—not normal but acknowledging the issue or the situation you're in but just making you feel like you haven't lost anything because they've done such a good job at parenting. Yeah, I think I would have preferred to have her here.*

**5.1.1.6 My Dad Needs More Support Than I Do.** As much as his father supports him, Oliver also feels that his father depends on him for emotional support. Oliver implied that he would not have had to fulfil this role if his mother were alive. He stated the following:

*My dad and I have a, not so much a father son relationship, yes, but also, we ... He's had his problems. He shared with me; I share my problems with him. It's very ... We know there's no secrets, yes, which I think that might have changed. I might have known less if my mom was alive because he might have relied on her instead of me.*

Thus, they have a very open relationship in which Oliver's father shares much with him. Oliver stated that he felt his father was truly happy before his wife's death. However, Oliver implied that his father's life took a negative turn after the loss of his wife.

Oliver spoke about his concerns about his father after his mother had died. For example, he recalled that when his grandmother had moved out of their house, his father had taken on increasingly more responsibility for raising Oliver. At this time, his father also had to work longer hours because he established hospitals in mining regions and thus had to commute 200 km between work and home. Despite his seemingly greater work responsibilities, Oliver's father prioritised his son's well-being. Oliver stated the following:

*My dad was very supportive with homework but he was very stressed at that time. He was, he was the last few years of him working at the mines, so I felt bad for him. But he always put me first. So he always did my homework before he went to his office or he always ensured that I read books just because he believed that a reading was the most important thing.*

In his early adolescent years, Oliver job-shadowed his father and shared this as a highlight through which he gained even more insight into his father's commitments. This

experience gave Oliver a deeper understanding of the environment in which his father worked. Oliver stated, *“I understood what he had gone through, what he was going through and acknowledging that it wasn’t as stressful as the past, but it was still very stressful”*.

Oliver still senses that the loss of his mother significantly affected his father. He believes that it was traumatic for his father to lose his wife. Oliver feels that he is responsible for helping his father in many respects. He mentioned the following: *It’s just [that] I need to support him. He may need more that he has shown—that he needs more. Just he needs more support than I do on this issue [death of Oliver’s mother]*.

**5.1.1.7 There Will Be No Other Thing Except School.** Oliver was able to identify ways in which he believes he has individually taken responsibility for his life in the years following the death of his mother. He conveyed that his difficult experiences have helped him become more positive and committed and more likely to take the initiative. Specifically, Oliver spoke about how his father instilled a love of learning and encouraged him to pursue academic excellence. For example, he mentioned how his father believed that reading was essential to his development. As a result, Oliver came to *“fall in love”* with books and found that his love of learning increased significantly over the years. Oliver emphasised the importance of obtaining a good education. He spoke about doing well at school and achieving exceptional academic marks. Moreover, Oliver shared the importance of achieving well both academically and in activities such as debating. He views the central theme of his life as revolving around perseverance and stubbornness and shares the following:

*[T]here will be no other thing except school. I think everything I’ll do will be geared towards those, this year’s marks, and next year’s marks. Just ... I have to do very well, obviously. Like culturally, Model United Nations conferences and public*

*speaking is very important. I want to become best speaker. I want to become one of the best delegates, and then obviously become a contender for one of the top academic spots just to secure my interests in the future.*

Although Oliver's father played an essential role in his academic achievements, Oliver reached a point during early adolescence where he wanted to be more independent in his academic goals. He tried to rely less on his father's support and believed that in doing so, he would relieve his father of the work pressures that he was experiencing.

Oliver explained this as follows:

*I've gotten to a point where I didn't want my dad's help anymore at all. So, he was quite surprised. I cut him off completely and he, he said, maybe we should go with transition. I cut him off completely. So, in primary school, he was helping me with speeches and [omitted] and [omitted]. And then when I went to, into Grade 8, I just wanted to do it by myself. It was ... so it was a turning point, independence really. And I enjoyed it. He [my father] enjoyed it because it was very stressful for him because he had to balance work. And then he felt, as all parents should, a responsibility to look after their child.*

Taking a step towards greater independence allowed Oliver greater individuality and perhaps a sense of liberation. Perhaps more pertinent was that Oliver perceived that his father was less stressed with not having to support Oliver in his academic work. Oliver explains, *"He's more relaxed now. He was very strung tight because he had work pulling him, me, and lots of other stuff. So, you know, he's relaxed a lot more"*.

**5.1.1.8 I Will Disappoint if I Don't Do as Well as Him.** In Oliver's narrative, a subtext reflects his perceived responsibility towards his father and the need to make his father proud. Beyond the mere love of learning instilled in him by his father, Oliver spoke about how his academic performance would allow him to pursue a medical career. He

believes that following this line of work will guarantee him financial freedom. According to Oliver, financial independence would permit him take care of his father and make him proud.

*Becoming financially stable as soon as possible in order to support my dad, my dad's dreams—maybe moving to [name omitted], get a vacation house. Not just to become ... to get to a point where I can support him as he has supported me would be very, like ... That'll be great.*

Oliver also shared thoughts about not disappointing his father in other ways. Considering his father's dire circumstances during Oliver's childhood, Oliver feels obligated to work hard and please his father. Oliver, therefore, seems not to take his opportunities for granted.

*I feel in my own sense, I will disappoint if I don't do as well as him because he lived. He had to sleep on a couch. I've got my own room, you know, and like, I've got my own study. I don't know where he did his work. So he like got top biology, maths prizes. Just to live up to that would be great.*

**5.1.1.9 I Judged People Solely on the Academics.** As time progressed, Oliver realised he could also apply himself in leadership roles. In reflecting on gaining more influence in potential leadership roles, he realised the importance of building peer relationships. When reflecting on memories describing regret and failure, Oliver referred to his solid academic drive and being judgemental towards those peers who were perhaps not as strong in their academic performance. He also mentioned that he used to prefer working alone and felt frustrated with his peers when engaging in group work. He explained,

*Grade 7, I was getting good marks. And at that stage, I believed academics was the only important thing. And that's what I judged people on was solely the academics.*

*Whereas now I, I prefer culturals to academics and stuff. So that's a very big regret, not [to] judge ... Being too critical of people.*

Oliver also implied that stronger interpersonal relationships and his peers' positive evaluations could help him secure a position within the leadership sphere. Oliver made the following statement: *"I think just going forward with people's opinions of me and obviously of prefectship voting and stuff like that. I think ... People's opinions of me might be a bit less, but yeah, I think it would be better"*.

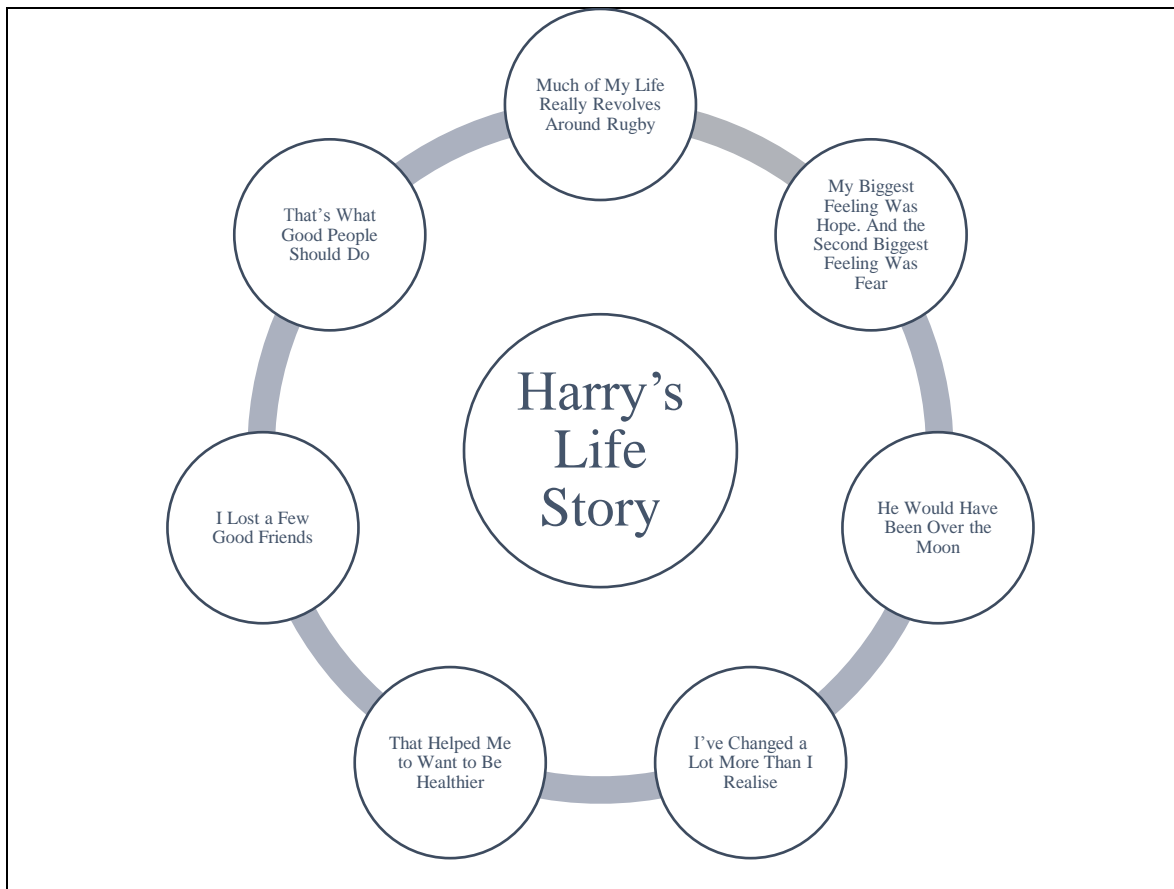
In summary, losing his mother at a very young age set in motion a cascade of stressors for his father who had to take care of his son as a young infant. Yet Oliver's story reveals the immense importance of having a family support system that provided comfort and care during challenging times. Other adults, for example, the women in Oliver's extended family, can often assume a substitute role for the parent who has passed away. For instance, Oliver saw his grandmother as a surrogate mother. Many years later, despite having grown somewhat apart from his grandmother, Oliver indirectly also grieved for his mother when his grandmother passed away. Oliver experienced his grandmother's funeral as his mother's funeral, which he could never have. It brought sadness but also closure in some way. Furthermore, Oliver's narrative illuminates the symbiotic relationship he experienced with his father. There is a reciprocal sense of responsibility to take care of each other. In some way, Oliver feels indebted to his father because of how much his father had to sacrifice to take care of him. Most of Oliver's goals are driven by a need to excel, primarily to express gratitude towards his father and to make him proud of him.

### ***5.1.2 Harry: "I've Changed a Lot More Than I Realise"***

Harry is a 19-year-old white male. He is currently a first-year student in psychology in Johannesburg. He lives with his biological mother and his sister, who is still in school. Both his parents qualified as teachers, so Harry grew up in a stimulating environment.

Harry presented as a friendly, outgoing young man. It was evident that he thought deeply about the prompts in the Life Story Interview. Not only did he provide a factual account of his life experiences, but he also appeared to connect emotionally with the memories that he shared in his story.

At 14 years old, Harry suddenly lost his father. In reflecting on his father's death, he recalled how his father had an unexpectedly severe and excruciating headache after he had come home from work coaching athletes at school. Almost immediately after complaining about his headache, Harry's father started vomiting. It was clear to him that his father was in the midst of a medical emergency. He had to be taken to the hospital as soon as possible. Harry's father was hospitalised and admitted to the ICU to treat what appeared to be a massive stroke. Within hours, the condition of his father deteriorated rapidly. Although he made it through the next day, he passed away the following evening.

**Figure 5***Visual Display of Harry's Narrative Themes*

**5.1.2.1 Much of My Life Really Revolves Around Rugby.** Harry started his life story by enthusiastically discussing his love for the sport and other hobbies. He mentioned that rugby had been a significant part of his life. Harry's father had also been enthusiastic about rugby and had elevated expectations that Harry would perform well in the sport. Rugby was thus a common interest between father and son. When Harry reflected on a positive childhood memory, he said that he realised rugby had been an essential part of his life since childhood.

*I think looking at stuff now, I realised how much of my life really revolves around rugby. When I was in Grade, Grade R, I started doing Rugga Kids [sports club]. And even though I really don't remember much about it at all, and I don't*

*remember much about it for years, I think just knowing that my dad was super happy, that I was super passionate about it and it's something we could enjoy. He could enjoy watching me play and that's at such a young age. It's nothing super serious or competitive, so I just enjoyed it. And I think looking back, that's just a small little fun part of my life that obviously shaped up into a lot more in my life.*

When asked about a significant time in his life, he mentioned that his Grade 6 rugby year was incredibly challenging. Harry felt he may have disappointed his father because of his underperformance on the rugby field. As a result, he felt intimidated by older players and gave up rugby. Challenges on the sports field led to frustration and strife in the relationship between Harry and his father.

A year later, in Grade 7, Harry gave rugby another chance. This time, there was a significant shift in Harry in that he felt much more confident on the sports field. Harry stated,

*It really brought a much better connection between us. And yeah, so, it really helped develop our relationship a bit. And it was, it was good. It was, it was very good. And that grew into my future of rugby at [name of school] as well and the development of our relationship even further.*

In addition to rugby, Harry also has a love of music, but he has not been able to develop this talent further in the last few years. However, he enjoys singing and making covers of songs and hopes to do more of these in the future.

**5.1.2.2 My Biggest Feeling Was Hope. And the Second Biggest Feeling Was Fear.** Harry spoke about how his father's death brought about considerable contradictory feelings that would alter his life in the future. For example, he participated in a drama play at school at the beginning of that year, which received significant accolades. Indeed, the school nominated them to perform abroad as a group. The success and opportunity that

dramatic arts brought to Harry's life were a significant source of pride for him and his parents.

However, shortly after Harry heard that his drama group would go abroad, his father suddenly passed away. The excitement of travelling abroad and being successful with his drama performance now made way for feelings of shock, fear, and uncertainty. Harry describes his father's passing as a significant life event. In recalling the event, Harry became very emotional. The event was still a vivid memory. He mentioned that although medical personnel rushed his critically ill father to the hospital, Harry was still hopeful that everything would be all right. It never occurred to him that his father might die. *"I can't remember the exact feeling and thoughts on the day, but it was ... my biggest feeling was hope. And the second biggest feeling was fear and nervousness"*. However, he realised that the situation was rather serious when his mother spoke to him the morning of his father's death. He said, *"[W]e went to the hospital together. And then she told me it's very unlikely that he was going to make it"*. Harry recalled how shocked he was and how he felt anxiety overcome him. Soon after returning from the hospital, they received the news that Harry's father had passed away. The feeling of dread stayed with Harry for many months after.

**5.1.2.3 He Would Have Been Over the Moon.** Another significant episode in Harry's life was the rugby season that followed the year in which Harry lost his father. Harry described the season as *"pretty incredible"*, with his team performing exceptionally well. What is more is that Harry felt that his father would have been incredibly excited and proud to see their team performing so well.

*I don't think he would have been able to be much prouder than that. And the Springboks winning the World Cup that year was also massive, and I just think he*

*would have absolutely, really just been, as I said, over the moon that year with, with the Rugby. My rugby and the Springboks and everything.*

In Harry's opinion, his excellent rugby performance would have made his father immensely proud. His success in sports was a way of coming to terms with his loss.

**5.1.2.4 I've Changed a Lot More Than I Realise.** The secondary losses brought about by the death of Harry's father brought many changes to Harry's life. However, not all these losses were experienced as disabling. On the contrary, Harry felt he could grow and change because of the negative experience of personal loss. Harry mentioned that his family had to change certain daily habits such as getting up earlier in the morning. Furthermore, he had to take greater responsibility for helping around the house and helping his mother:

*I've always said I like to be the man of the house now, but there have been times I've fallen short of that and struggled. But I've always wanted to. And this year especially, I've really like taken on that role properly. Whenever my mom asked me to do something, I'll happily do it if she ... I, and see she needs help.*

Harry also feels that he has become more mature in his relationship with his younger sister. Although they experience a significant amount of sibling rivalry, his reactions to her have changed since his father's passing:

*But I have really changed a lot of small habits and looking back at stuff, I've changed a lot more than I realise. And every time we have a fight, I realise that [I've] changed more and more little habits that irritate her. And it's good. It's helped me a lot because it's helped me to mature.*

**5.1.2.5 That Helped Me to Want to Be Healthier.** In Harry's Grade 11 year, he decided to make significant changes to his life. During the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Harry had to study online. However, having to concentrate online became

increasingly difficult for him. Since his academic performance was important, he felt anxious about his declining academic performance. At this time, he also formed a new friendship that became a source of support for him. However, Harry spent significantly more time with this friend, which led to a further decline in his academic marks. A turning point came for Harry when he realised that he had to reprioritise his life and make some lifestyle changes:

*And I met a new friend online that I really became good friends with. But then I dedicated too much time to them. Then my marks started to suffer a bit, and I learnt my lesson in that term that that's not going to happen again. And then my marks started picking up, and over time, they just got better and better. And I also lost a lot of weight in that time. I lost almost 10 kilograms. So that was, it was pretty good. It was mostly because of stress. So, I wouldn't say it was the healthiest way to lose weight, but it set me off in the right way.*

Harry described his weight loss as a significant turning point in his life. He mentioned that he did not realise how unhealthily he had been living before losing weight. The loss in weight resulted in him feeling more in control of his life. However, his mother thinks he can sometimes be “*obsessive*” over dieting. He stated,

*I'm checking details for certain foods or exercises that will be beneficial and trying to find the most efficient way to be healthy and to do things. So I'm just using a little table and fixing it but just to be as efficient as possible with the things I eat and stuff. And my mom says I'm obsessive a lot with that, which I do understand.*

Harry explained that his father's death caused him to lose weight. He believes that taking care of his health is a way for him to avoid a fate similar to that of his father:

*I think it's helped me to want to be healthier as well because I know that it's very possible that part of the stress on his life was him having diabetes. And I think that helped me to want to be healthier as well.*

**5.1.2.6 I Lost a Few Good Friends.** However, some significant life events relate to Harry having experienced betrayal, disappointment, and loss in his relationships. A low point in Harry's life was when an argument on the way back from a school camp resulted in him losing the support of many of his friends. Harry described it as a "*personal attack*" that left him emotionally hurt and disappointed in his friends:

*But then they decided that it was probably best to not talk to me. So for a couple of months, I didn't talk to that. The person who started it and their friends didn't talk to me either. So I lost a few good friends at that point.*

The tension between Harry and his friends was challenging, and he thought of moving schools. However, as time went by, some of his friendships were restored. Harry mentioned that he was able to forgive his friends. However, to this day, he finds it anxiety provoking to say things in groups. That event has left a psychological mark, which has made Harry more cautious and anxious when in groups.

**5.1.2.7 That's What Good People Should Do.** In his narration, it was clear that Harry valued relationships and connection. A significant part of his identity relates to his faith community and his school friendships. In Harry's Grade 7 year, his cousin invited him to church. Within this religious community, Harry found purpose and meaning. However, more importantly, he also formed friendships that were significant sources of support. These friendships helped him cope with the loss and trauma of his father's passing and the loss of friendships at high school:

*I felt so at home there and as I said, I still go there to this day. I still have some of the best friends I've ever made there. And so it's clearly shaped my life massively and I love it, and I really want to go there forever.*

Harry's relationships with teachers at school were also a significant source of support for him. When reflecting on a vivid adolescent childhood memory, Harry mentioned that the support of his schoolteachers shaped his life positively. Their help inspired him to pursue a career in one of the helping professions:

*It's, that's been massive in shaping me. I've always looked up to the male teachers as, as role models, especially after my father passed away. It's helped me to know I look at them and see the attributes that I like. And I think that that's what good people should hold. And that's helped me to aspire to do so. And seeing the nurturing that both male and female teachers do has really just helped me a lot as well because it's helped me in my career choice of psychology to want to help people just because I've seen how much they've helped me.*

In summary, Harry's narrative reflects a story of overcoming and transforming many personal and relational challenges. A recurring theme relates to making his father proud while he was alive and after he had died. Through sports, specifically rugby, Harry found a connection with his father. Moreover, rugby was a vehicle of self-discovery for Harry that helped him to grow increasingly self-assured and confident. It was not always an easy journey for him. As he struggled with rugby, Harry felt an increasing sense that he was letting his father down. It was with a real sense of pride, however, that Harry was able to improve his performance on the sports field, which eventually accumulated in him being an outstanding rugby player and leading him and his team to win a significant match in his Grade 12 year. At this time, Harry was also dealing with immense grief after suddenly losing his father only months before. Their triumph brought a sense of closure to Harry

because he felt that he had finally made his father proud. After his father's passing, Harry reflected on his own life. It brought him to a deeper understanding of his own story, and he came to realise that he needed to make different decisions if he was going to live a healthy life. Losing weight brought about even more confidence and helped him navigate difficulties with judgemental friends. He found deeper connections in his faith community, which made him realise that he wanted to help people. Currently, Harry is studying to become a psychologist because he wants to make a difference in the lives of other young people.

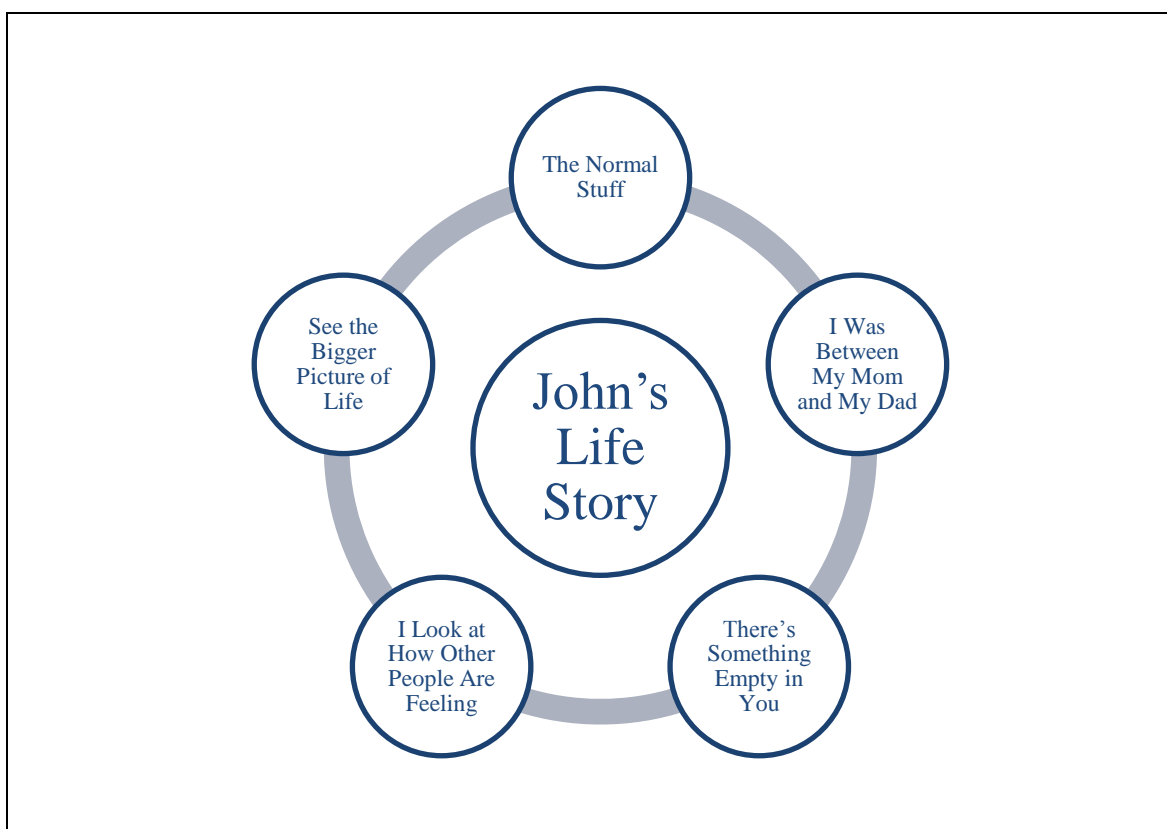
### ***5.1.3 John: "You Feel a Sense of Just Nothing Feeling Right"***

John is a 16-year-old white male who is currently in Grade 10. He resides with his mother and older sister. In the interview, John came across as a kind, soft-spoken young man. In telling his life story, one sensed that he is still trying to come to terms with many distressing life events, including the loss of his father. John had a sombre demeanour during the interview. When he recalled the passing of his father, he spoke in the historical present, which is using the present tense when narrating past events. In addition, John spoke in the third person and did not refer to himself in sharing his life story.

John's father passed away two years ago when he was 14 years old. His father had been having trouble with high blood pressure for some time and suddenly became ill and had to be hospitalised. In the days following his hospitalisation, the health of John's father deteriorated, and he passed away.

**Figure 6**

*Visual Display of John's Narrative Themes*



**5.1.3.1 The Normal Stuff.** John's early childhood was spent with his mother, father, and sister in the South of Johannesburg. For the most part, John described his childhood as normal, with the usual "boy stuff". For him, no particular event stood out except that his life felt normal. In many ways, normality is precisely what makes his earlier life unique because his current life feels out of control and unpredictable:

*I made some friends here living a normal life, everyday type of things. Do normal things on the weekends. Family, yeah. That's the beginning of my life. I'll just, normal life. Just going home, doing the normal boy things. You know, playing PlayStation. The normal, normal stuff.*

'Normal' represented stability in John's life. It reminded him of a safe family environment and carefree days at school with his peers. Notably, John remembers his

earlier years as a time when he could easily make friends. He also spoke about how he felt love for the first time in his life and how in many ways, he felt better equipped to deal with life's challenges.

During his early years, John also felt he had a typical family despite arguments between his parents. There were some fond memories of his family being together. For example, when reflecting on a high point in his life, John recalled how he and his family would go on holiday, have meaningful conversations, and engage in pleasurable activities: *"We would sit around a table together and talk about life with each other. So doing family things, like, really stands out to me because it feels like ... we like one and we are family, you know"*. At that time, John felt that there was nothing to worry about and that he was part of a *"normal family"*. For him, it was a time in which there was no stress in his life, and everyone bonded well with each other.

However, looking back, John longingly reflected on a carefree existence in his early primary school years. Moreover, John felt that the sense of 'normality' was fleeting. Soon, the 'rollercoaster' of life would make the carefree days a memory of the past.

**5.1.3.2 I Was in Between My Mom and My Dad.** John mentioned his early recollections of his parents having arguments early in the interview. For example, he recalled that Grade 7 was a challenging year for him. He remembered that his parents were arguing and he felt helpless in dealing with the situation:

*When my parents started fighting, I feel [sic] like I was in between of everything, like I was in between my mom and my dad. And I felt like I was like, What am I going to do? Cause I felt like there was no way they're going to fix it or this noise. What am I going to do?*

He said that he felt confused and lost during this time in his life. Emotionally, he felt confused and anxious about not knowing how he could make things better between his

parents. Throughout his adolescent years, John experienced a sense that something terrible could happen in his parent's relationship. Nevertheless, he was not able to anticipate what the outcome could have been. During this time, John wanted to speak to his father about what he was experiencing. However, John mentioned that his father was absent from home most of the time because he was working. In this regard, John's early adolescent years were a time of confusion and loneliness, and it was a difficult time for him. He stated, "*My mom actually really kept it like away from me. So, I felt I didn't know what was happening really. So, I felt really confused, like, why was my dad not home?*". In retrospect, John has a great deal of resentment towards his mother for not being more open and honest with him about what was happening between his parents. John feels especially angry about the secrecy, considering that many of his family members knew that his parents were experiencing difficulties in their marriage.

**5.1.3.3 There's Something Empty in You.** The central turning point for John was when his father passed away. Even presently, John believes that the loss is ongoing. This experience has changed the people around him in several ways, and John has had to come to terms with how his family has been negatively affected by his father's death. The trauma continues to be a constant presence for John:

*Life's different because you feel the sense of—also you're like there's something empty in you. You're upset. Your mom is upset. Your family is upset. So your life is different. Everyone around you is upset, so you feel a sense of just nothing feeling right in a way. So it's just there was a turning point in my life where it still feels like now. It's still affecting us.*

In addition, John believes that he should keep his feelings to himself in order to cope with his loss in the best way possible:

*It's definitely difficult keeping your feelings in, but I know I have to do it sometimes. I know that what's in my head has to stay there. Sometimes it shouldn't go anywhere else... or it might just hurt someone else.*

He also mentioned that he was shocked when he heard that his father had passed so suddenly. In the community and among friends, a flood of support came from all directions. Although this was done to help the family, John felt overwhelmed by the situation. There was a feeling of fatigue and exhaustion in his body; all he wanted was to sleep. He needed time to process what had happened, but he was unable to do so. As the funeral was taking place, John could not contain his sorrow when he saw how the family was suffering. He was overcome by grief. He said, “[C]arrying my dad hurt me a lot because I didn't really want to see that”.

Even now, John is still unable to find meaning in his father's death, and it is difficult for him to find a reason as to why it happened. In addition, he is also having difficulty in coping emotionally. He still needs to process much of what he experienced, yet he feels unable to do so. *“It's definitely difficult keeping your feelings in, but I know I have to do it sometimes. I know it's what's in my head has to stay there. Sometimes, it shouldn't go anywhere else”.*

For Harry, many unanswered questions and lost opportunities remain. The emptiness is ever-present in his life: *“The world definitely has moved on, so—and they should. To be honest, the world should move on. Life goes on. But, um, about me, my mom, my sister, it will stick with us forever”.*

**5.1.3.4 I Look at How Other People Are Feeling.** Throughout his narrative, John referenced the importance of forming friendships, and this is an integral part of his life. He felt a profound sense of loneliness due to the loss, especially within the context of his family. However, from his story, it appears that John longs for connections with other

people. He believes that it is crucial to focus on the importance of relationships. As he explained in his narrative, the experience of losing his father caused him to change his perspective on how to perceive other people's struggles. The loss of his father and the different challenges he has faced in life have helped him become more empathic towards other people: *"I definitely look at other people's perspective better. Like, what they've gone through. I don't just ... I look at how other people are feeling because I know I wouldn't want that on anyone else how I felt"*.

John continued that he can relate well to his peers who, for example, have lost their grandfathers. Because of his life story, he can relate to the pain, sufferings, and losses that they are experiencing. In his experience, people have treated him differently since he lost his father, but rather than treating people as outsiders, John tries to understand what initially happened to them.

**5.1.3.5 See the Bigger Picture of Life.** During the interview, John mentioned that he wants to focus more on his future career and his dream of becoming a lawyer and helping others. He also stated that he *"hope[s] the world connects better with what just happened to us and our people to see the bigger picture of life"*.

John framed much of his life experiences as *"mental preparation"* to help him deal with all the opportunities and challenges that have come his way in his life story. He calls his life story, *"The Rollercoaster"* stating, *"life goes fast. And if you're not prepared, then it can hit you hard"*. In John's view, relationships are the most crucial thing in life and are what he values most. Nothing is more important to him than living a whole life and appreciating every moment: *"Anything can happen at any time. So just make the most of the time with the people you love. Because anything can happen"*.

In summary John's narrative emphasises the dramatic changes that parental loss brought for him and his whole family. Perhaps most striking is the longing that John

expressed for a time of normality similar to what he had experienced in his earlier years. As he reflected on his childhood, he nostalgically recalled times of family dinners, vacations, and togetherness. However, the conflict in his parent's marriage was the start of the 'rollercoaster' in his life. He experienced significant turmoil and felt helpless in being unable to 'fix' his parents' marriage. In the wake of his father's death, John felt resentment towards his mother. He blames her for much that has gone wrong. As a result, his family life has been fragmented, and he feels lonely and profoundly silenced. He expressed that he thinks it is better to remain silent about these issues since he is able to deal with them when alone. However, his loss has made him realise that life can change in an instant. John now wants to nurture his relationships and to extend empathy towards others who also struggle with losses in their lives.

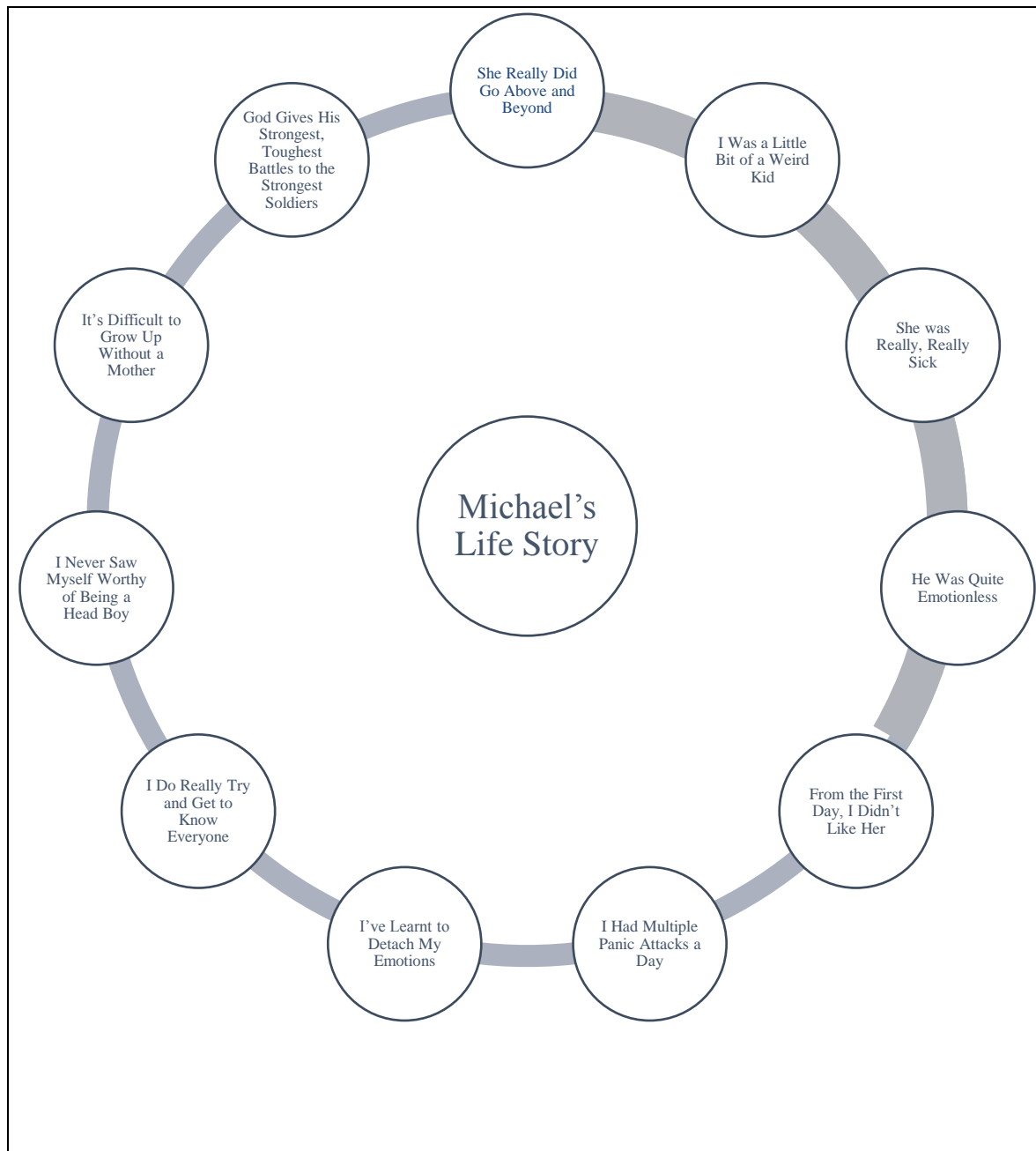
#### ***5.1.4 Michael: "God Gives His Strongest, Toughest Battles to the Strongest Soldiers"***

Michael is a 17-year-old white male living with his father in an apartment. He is currently in Grade 12 and holds the position of head boy. In his interview, Michael was a calm, friendly, and extroverted young man who could articulate his life story in remarkable detail. He came across as a profoundly reflective young person who spent much time self-reflecting on his life experiences.

Michael shared the story of his mother's death in great detail. As Michael turned seven years old, his life began to take a sharp turn. Michael's mother was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. During the next two years, a variety of surgeries and experiential medical interventions were conducted to improve the health of his mother. As a result, Michael's life was also disrupted in a very significant way. Unfortunately, his mother lost her battle against the disease and passed away. At the time, Michael had just turned nine years old.

**Figure 7**

*Visual Display of Michael's Narrative Themes*



**5.1.4.1 She Really Did Go Above and Beyond.** Michael's parents were more mature and older when they were expecting him. Michael has heard that his parents took the pregnancy very seriously. He said, "*She really did go above and beyond with everything that was related to me*". His mother, for example, would play baroque music while Michael was still in utero. In addition, she would ensure that she ate healthily, even

after Michael was born. His parents wanted the best for Michael and invested much time in his upbringing. For example, later in his childhood, his mother exposed him to classical music, world history, and museums. In addition, she encouraged him to play musical instruments and to participate in karate and soccer. When speaking about this, it was clear that it brought back fond memories for Michael. For him, his mother was his “*closest friend*”, and he would never have the same connection with anybody else that he had with her. Michael has a deep sense that he was loved and wanted when he was born.

**5.1.4.2 I Was a Little Bit of a Weird Kid.** Michael recalled having developmental challenges growing up and struggled with separation anxiety and sensory integration difficulties in his younger years. He said, “*I would hold my mother’s leg and I would never go play with the kids. I did go for tactile therapy ‘cause I had issues touching sand—I was a little bit of a weird kid*”. Being surrounded by mostly adults, Michael gravitated more towards grown-ups. He sometimes found it challenging to engage with other kids and experienced ambivalence in playing with them. He recalled that some of his favourite childhood memories were times he spent with his maternal aunt and his older girl cousins. Memories around Easter egg hunts and Christmas family time stood out for him as some of his most memorable childhood moments.

Michael spent much of his time in his imagination and remembered enjoying playing with Lego and aspiring to become an aeronautical engineer. Being practically minded, Michael enjoyed playing with puzzles and building blocks and would often design paper aeroplanes. He also found solace in nature and recalled being fond of spending time in the garden and taking care of his herbs and plants. He believes that this love of gardening taught him the value of responsibility from a young age.

**5.1.4.3 She Was Really, Really Sick.** Life took a sharp turn when Michael turned seven years old. His mother was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. This episode in his

life would be a significant life-altering event. Initially, his mother had to undergo surgery for the doctors to remove the growth. However, the doctors did not execute this process successfully. According to Michael, *“They actually made a mistake in surgery because they didn’t cut far enough around the cancer to remove the whole thing. Um, so that was actually the reason she ended up being sick”*. At this point, Michael had an inclination that something was wrong but did not believe it was dire. In his mind, his mother and father would take care of things, and he thought his mother would soon be healthy. He was hopeful that all would turn out well.

The doctors conveyed that there was no treatment available at that time in South Africa. However, medical trials in the USA proved to be a source of hope for the family. Michael’s parents decided to relocate to the USA temporarily with Michael in order for his mother to receive treatment through a new medical trial. Michael was only eight years old at the time. From his perspective, it felt similar to a *“gap year”*, and he experienced it very much like a holiday. He would have about two hours of home-schooling every day. There was little pressure on him, and he enjoyed the new ‘adventure’. Looking back, Michael felt that his parent’s main priorities were to help his mother recover and to make life as comfortable for him as possible. However, there were moments that Michael recalled his mother being very ill:

*I remember there was [sic] some days where she was really tired, and she’d been for chemo. Uh, so she never lost her hair. But uh, she was really, really sick at that point, and she’d just sit on the couch with the Candy Crush. She would lie down. Um, but even a thing like going over a speed bump, uh, in the car, you know, was painful.*

His mother’s health progressively worsened. She was often tired, and it was clear to Michael that she was not healthy. One evening, she was rushed to the hospital. The growth

had spread causing a build-up of pressure in her brain. Despite it all, Michael still felt that all would turn out well in the end.

Finally, the family found a medical specialist who could assist his mother and who provided treatment that she could continue back in South Africa. Eventually, Michael and his family returned to South Africa. However, shortly after their return, his mother's health turned unexpectedly, and she was hospitalised to keep her comfortable. Michael recalled the last night that he saw his mother. Even at this critical point, he believed his mother would make it through:

*I remember thinking, you know, my mom's going to make it even though, uh, my mom had even told me. She'd come into the room one night and said that 'Michael, uh, you know, I think I'm going to die'. But dad was going to be there to look after you, so don't worry. And um, so that was the one night at the hospital, and I still never took it seriously. Um, I was like, it's going to be okay. It's going to be OKAY.*

That was the last night that Michael saw his mother alive. Unfortunately, Michael's mother lost her cancer battle and passed away. Michael was nine years old at the time.

**5.1.4.4 He Was Quite Emotionless.** Michael recalled how life took a dramatic turn after his mother died. As a result, it was tough for him to connect with his father. Recalling that time, Michael said the following:

*Whatever I would say or whatever it was like, it would just go straight over his head. Um. And he was quite emotionless, I think, uh, uh, as he was worried about me, but I think he was just so distraught at the time.*

His father became increasingly withdrawn, retreating to his room most of the time. Michael slept in the same bed as his father for the first year after his mother had passed away. After that, his father decided to relocate, and the family moved to a different city suburb. Thereafter, Michael slept in his own room. From Michael's perspective, his father

became depressed and struggled with the loneliness of losing his wife. Moreover, Michael felt increasingly distant from his father. He had to cope with the physical loss of his mother and the emotional distance between him and his father.

**5.1.4.5 From the First Day, I Didn't Like Her.** Two years after Michael's mother passed away, his father entered into a new relationship and decided to remarry shortly thereafter. This episode was a challenging experience for Michael because it brought about complex family relationships and conflict that would significantly affect Michael's psychological well-being. Michael had to integrate with his stepmother and stepsister. He recalled that he found it exceptionally difficult to connect with them and described his stepmother as a cold person with a "*dark personality*". He stated,

*He [my father] met somebody new, got into a relationship with her. And from the first day, I didn't like her. She was a very cold person. Just really weird, and it was not only me, I think a lot of our family struggled to accept her.*

When reflecting about a significant event in which he demonstrated wisdom, Michael recalled telling his father not to marry his stepmom. Early on, Michael could sense that she would not be an appropriate match for his father. Michael further described her as wanting to have the sole attention of his father; she "*did not want me around*".

Michael reported that his stepmother would often try to blame him for things that he did not do. A specific harmful event in his adolescent years involved her accusing him of accessing pornography sites with her credit card. However, as Michael reported, these online purchases turned out to be games that she was accessing and purchasing. For Michael, this caused much anger. She would suggest to Michael's father that he be placed in a boarding school or that he should rather live with his aunt. He recalled how she struggled with what he describes as Munchausen Syndrome, faking being ill with cancer

and other illnesses. Often, she would threaten suicide. From Michael's perspective, Michael believed that his father had "got wrapped up" in a toxic dynamic.

**5.1.4.6 I Had Multiple Panic Attacks a Day.** Understandably, Michael felt isolated and distressed by this. Most of the time, he would play PlayStation in his room to escape the difficult circumstances. Michael thought that the traumas were endless and felt that he never had a "break" between the loss of his mother and the new family constellation in which he felt abandoned and isolated. His mental health started seriously deteriorating, and he began to develop severe panic attacks. He said: "*I had, uh, multiple and multiple panic attacks a day, and it just feels like your heart's beating out of your body*". His first panic attack stands out as a significant memory:

*Psychologically, the point that I was the most down was the day—I remember the day that I had my first panic attack. It was while we were still in the house with my stepmom. My dad, they had gone out and they left me at home to do some schoolwork, and I remember, I thought I was having a heart attack. I called my dad and said, 'Dad, Dad, I think I'm having a heart attack'. I was just uncontrollably crying. And leading up [to] and around that point, I think I was quite a depressed child.*

Michael's father sought psychological help, and the doctor prescribed medication to help Michael with his anxiety that seemed to stem directly from the isolation, anger, hurt, and confusion that Michael was experiencing with his father and stepfamily. He received therapy, which appeared to be of immense help in supporting him with his anxiety and mental health.

**5.1.4.7 I've Learnt to Detach My Emotions.** Michael believes that he has developed issues trusting others and has consequently developed the ability to detach himself from them. In doing so, he says, he is unaffected by others disappointing him:

*I've learnt to detach my emotions from people. And um, an interesting thing that I've noticed is I find it difficult to, uh, uh, like love, uh, a girl, for example. Because, uh, after what I've been through in my trust, it's just, um, I say, 'Oh let me detach myself before I get hurt'. Yeah. Um, but even with friends, ah, I have drilled it into myself that they're there. And, um, don't get me wrong, I do care about everything. I do love my friends. But, um, I wouldn't have a problem if they let me down.*

Michael also had to learn to cope with the emotional turmoil of his grief. He expanded on his grief process and described how he sometimes experiences wandering thoughts:

*You don't actually understand what. You're in such a state of shock that it's like unreal, like you're still waiting for her to come back. And even to this day, I'll get thoughts. And, um, what happens if she, if she didn't—you know, what happens if she isn't dead and she's still alive somehow, you know? And, uh, you know your mind just. But, um, yeah, I know. I think you never forget. But as time goes on, it, it gets better. Uh, we always have bad days.*

**5.1.4.8 I Do Really Try and Get to Know Everyone.** Michael emphasises that he has learnt to become independent over the years. He mentioned that he enjoys his own company but tries to reach out to everyone with whom he has contact. For example, he will initiate a conversation on the aeroplane or with the Uber driver. In the discussion, Michael stated that he values the connection with others:

*I think the more people you know, the better almost. So I do really try and get to know everyone. But, um, I think everyone's got an equal value. And, um, often people miss that completely. And I just—I really don't like [it] when people are fake.*

There are still times when Michael feels that he is an outsider, especially with his peer group: *“I feel like I’m out of my age group”*. However, he believes he has *“a bit of an ego”* and recognises this in himself. He believes that it helps him to navigate life:

*I think to get through what I have been through, I think you do need to have a bit of an ego and a bit of, um, ‘I’m the best’. You know, obviously not overpowering your personality but you do need it to cope with that.*

**5.1.4.9 I Never Saw Myself Worthy of Being a Head Boy.** During the time of the turmoil that Michael experienced, he found a sense of connection and attachment at school with his teachers and peers:

*I think I used to get a lot of my attention from school, and I think I used to seek a lot of it at school because I wouldn’t really get that much attention at home. But it taught me to be independent.*

Michael recalled an earlier experience in his schooling career in which he told a student not to play with a stick. In passing, a teacher commented on his behaviour and said he was *“Head Boy material”*. His friend overheard that and kept teasing him about it. The teacher’s comment became a central part of his identity—that of the responsible student. In 2021, Michael was elected by his peers and teachers as the Head Boy of his school. He described this as a turning point because it brought him many exciting opportunities where he could *“extend”* himself. Michael believes that his life story was responsible for him being elected to lead his school community. Considering the challenges and adversity he experienced, Michael described himself as a child who had to adjust and who almost grew up before his time: *“I think ... it’s... I think throughout my whole life, I’ve had to mature faster than, you know, what was anticipated. And I think I was a little grown up, I guess you could say”*. His elected position surprised him, although he had worked hard towards it:

*I wasn't expecting it to be me. Uh, as much as, uh, people were saying and, you know, I was never a top student. I was never, um, anyone that I saw myself worthy of being, you know, a head boy, but I surprised myself. And my mom used just [to] say, 'Shoot for the moon. And even if you miss, you'll land amongst the stars'. But I think I shot for the stars, and I landed on the moon.*

**5.1.4.10 It's Difficult to Grow Up Without a Mother.** These days, Michael feels that he does not take his loss too seriously. He believes that he has spent a significant amount of time working through his loss. His friends often joke about each other's mothers, but he would not play into that. Although he realises that it is meant as humour, he does sometimes feel hurt by it. Michael, however, thinks that nobody should feel uncomfortable around him because he lost his mother at a young age. He wants to be treated the same as everyone else. Nevertheless, he believes that the loss of his mother has left a void, especially in regard to needing someone to give him attention: *"I think it's difficult to grow up without a mother in your life. I've had my father, but, uh, it, it's, it's a lack of motherly love. I mean, you could say that, that, uh, I do miss, um"*. Michael feels that his life might have been different if his mother were still alive. He believes that perhaps he may have been more trusting of others.

**5.1.4.11 God Gives His Strongest, Toughest Battles to the Strongest Soldiers.** Michael has a positive outlook for his future and believes that he will be able to achieve his goals despite some relational trust issues. He hopes that he can live abroad. He intends to study further in the field of commerce and business management. Michael also said that he is considering studying agriculture because of his love of being outside in nature. He does not necessarily see himself in a relationship since he feels it could complicate his successes in life. Instead, he wants to focus on his career. *"I think just to be able to work longer hours, to [be] able to ... I really want to try and push myself and see how far can I go"*.

However, later in the interview, he said that he might consider having a family and children but seemed ambivalent about it: *“I always, I always do say that the world is overpopulated, and it is selfish bringing kids into the world that we live in today because of just kids glued onto technology”*.

In some way, Michael has been able to make sense of his adverse experiences through his spiritual beliefs: *“I think God gives His strongest, toughest battles to the strongest soldiers”*.

In summary, it is especially noteworthy to notice the high level of coherence and detail that Michael brought to the telling of significant life events. His story illustrates the immense power of a secure early attachment that made him feel loved and wanted. His narrative also highlights the tremendous psychological impact of stressors for a young bereaved child and the importance of having an emotionally attuned caregiver in the aftermath of loss. Stressors such as integrating with a new blended family were psychologically taxing for Michael, but his story has a strong thread of the redemptive narrative. Despite dealing with the loss of his mother and the subsequent events that unfolded, Michael was able to influence his life positively. Furthermore, he has developed an exceptional ability to self-reflect and make sense of his life experiences. With a strong sense of himself, a firm grounding in his spirituality, and a keen interest in his fellow man, it is no surprise that his peers elected him as a visionary leader at school.

#### ***5.1.5 Benjamin: “I Would Have Really Liked to Have Him in My Life”***

Benjamin is a white, 15-year-old male living with his 17-year-old brother, his two great-aunts, his grandmother, and his great-grandmother. Benjamin mentioned that one of his great-aunts is disabled. He has limited contact with his biological mother and hardly speaks to her. Furthermore, Benjamin has a stepsister who he estimates to be about nine years old. However, he has never met her. When he thought about his maternal side of the

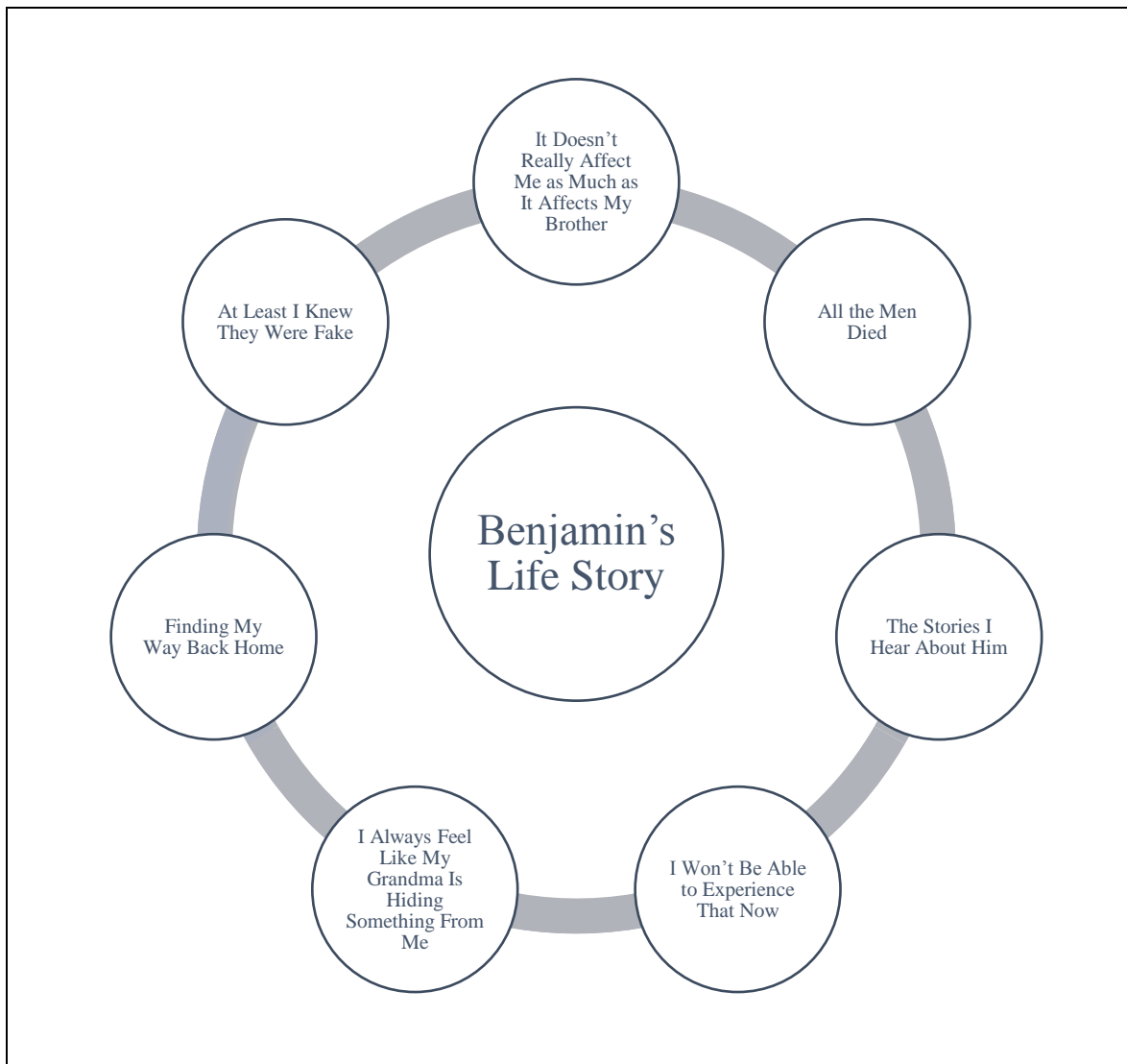
family, Benjamin mentioned that he does not know his maternal grandparents, uncles, aunts, or cousins. The members of his father's family play an essential role in his life. They often spent time together during celebrations such as birthdays and Christmas.

As a result of a motor vehicle accident, Benjamin's father and his paternal grandfather passed away. At the time, Benjamin was only six months old and thus has no memory of the event. Shortly after the loss of his father, Benjamin's mother left the family, and he and his brother lived with his aunt. The sense of abandonment by their mother may very well have resulted in attachment ruptures for Benjamin and his brother.

Benjamin could not travel to the researcher's consultation rooms, so the meeting was held online via ZOOM. In the meeting, it was evident that Benjamin was a gregarious young person who enjoyed talking about his life experiences. He was incredibly excited to speak about his friends and his interest in basketball.

**Figure 8**

*Visual Display of Benjamin's Narrative Themes*



#### **5.1.5.1 It Doesn't Really Affect Me as Much as It Affects My Brother.**

Benjamin mentioned at the outset of the interview that his older brother had experienced more difficulties in coming to terms with their father's death. He said: *"I just wanted to check because it [the death of his father] doesn't really affect me as much as it affects my brother or anything"*. The relationship between Benjamin and his brother used to be strained. His brother struggled with numerous mental health issues, including addiction, which has placed increased stress on the whole family. However, their relationship

improved during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Benjamin reported that his brother has frequent contact with their biological mother. Benjamin, however, hardly sees his mother.

**5.1.5.2 All the Men Died.** Benjamin's life has brought many challenges. With significant male family members passing, Benjamin feels that his life has changed. Benjamin spoke about a central theme in his life, namely the death of men in his family: *"I think there's like three men left, and I've got a really, really big family. I think there's only about three men left because all of, all of them died"*. During the online interview, Benjamin turned away from his computer screen. He proceeded to show the pictures of all his loved ones who had passed on. He kept the photographs of his loved ones and their funeral letters on display in his room on what seemed to be an altar that he had made. Notably, the pictures and funeral letters were of all the significant men in his life. As he pointed to the images, he said, *"Yeah, that's my Uncle [name omitted]. That's my father. That's my other uncle. That's my great grandfather. And that's my grandfather. And that's my other uncle"*. Benjamin's father passed away in a motor vehicle accident together with his paternal grandfather. Benjamin was six months old at the time. Now, many years later, Benjamin tries to maintain a bond with the influential men in his life by keeping memorabilia of them at hand.

**5.1.5.3 The Stories I Hear About Him.** When describing his father, Benjamin declared, *"I never really knew him, obviously, but the stories I hear about him and things, it sounds like he was awesome. Like, I would have really liked to have him in my life"*. Benjamin had an idyllic image of his father as a youthful man, almost as if he were an adolescent:

*I've heard that, like, he was always so fun. Him and my grandpa used to sneak out, and they used to go to clubs and parties and things, and my grandma used to get mad at them. And then they used to have so much fun with each other. They always*

*used to go out like almost every week, and they used to go do something different. And they went on road trips. And I've always wanted to go on a road trip like ....*

Two months after Benjamin's father passed away, his mother left the family. His aunt subsequently raised Benjamin and his brother. Benjamin's memories and the family stories about the other essential men in his life have helped him to understand better who they were. Unfortunately, not all recollections are positive. For example, Benjamin described how his paternal grandfather behaved violently towards others:

*So my grandpa used to abuse my gran. Like, back in the day, in front of my aunts and things in front of my aunts and dad. So that was pretty tough to hear. And she tells me all the stories when he used to come home drunk with a gun, used to hit her and things. It's not really something I should hear, but at the same time, like, I want to know everything about them. And also, this one time he came in the house, he was drunk. He started hitting my grandma. He pulled out his gun. He was about to shoot my gran. My gran hit the gun up and it went through the roof. The bullet went through the roof. And then Dad came in and started fighting him.*

Benjamin's great uncle seemed to play an essential role in his life. Benjamin described the relationship as close with Uncle [name omitted]. He stated,

*He was like my great uncle, kind of. I was pretty close with him. I mean, he used to support the Blue Bulls in rugby. I put the Lions, so, but we used to get along and we used to watch together. Like over the weekends, we would go to Checkers or Pick n Pay. And we used to buy like a bunch of biltong.*

**5.1.5.4 I Won't Be Able to Experience That Now.** Benjamin has faced several secondary losses due to the absence of a paternal figure in his life, and he fears that he is missing many opportunities. For example, he mentioned, "*But like, ok, like fishing and things like that and doing camping. Like I won't be able to experience that now*". He

expressed his frustration of being raised by mostly women: *“But it was really upsetting because, like, the things that men do compared to the things that women do, like totally different things”*. Benjamin also expressed concern that his family deprived him of the opportunity to live the everyday life of an adolescent. He spoke about his grandmother’s trauma of losing her son (Benjamin’s father), which left his grandmother being overprotective towards Benjamin:

*A normal kid would be able to do things like going out with friends, sleepovers, things like that. I’m not allowed to do that because she’s [his grandmother] scared that something is going to happen to me because she lost a son.*

Typical of an adolescent’s drive towards independence, Benjamin would like to experience greater freedom: *“I also need to be out because one day she’s not going to be there for me, and I need to learn how to do things by myself. They’re not always going to be there for me”*. Despite his need for independence and more freedom, Benjamin appears to appreciate the value of the boundaries that his caregivers have established.

At this point in his life, basketball is integral to his identity, and he seems to heed prominent players’ advice:

*And I get that some things that they [friends] do obviously I won’t do and some of them when they take drugs and things, I know I wouldn’t do that because one thing I learnt—I don’t know, one of the basketball players said it during the NBA. He said, ‘Know the difference between enjoying your youth and destroying your future’ and that, I really listened to that.*

For now, Benjamin intends to focus on his basketball career and hopes to be granted more freedom to be with his friends. What is certain though is that he misses the fantastic adventures he could have had with his father and all the other male family members.

### 5.1.5.5 I Always Feel Like My Grandma Is Hiding Something from Me.

Benjamin feels that many parts of his family life story remain unknown and hidden from him. At times, he feels frustrated and stressed by his family, which contradicts his earlier narrative of feeling supported by his family: *“I’m confused because sometimes things just get really confusing, like especially with my parents and things. But I always feel like my grandma is hiding something from me”*. In some way, Benjamin feels frustrated because there is the expectation from his family that he keeps open and honest communication with them, and he thinks that this should be a reciprocal expectation. He is especially concerned about secrets that may be withheld from him after overhearing his family members speak to each other. He conveyed the following:

*The other night, my gran was talking to my great-aunt, and they were busy talking, and then my great-aunt said, ‘Have you told [name omitted] and [name omitted]?’ [inaudible] and things. And then she said, my [great-]aunt said, ‘No, she can’t hurt us like that’. So, it made me like questioning, like what aren’t they telling me? So, I asked my gran what aren’t they telling me, and she said she doesn’t know what she is talking about. But I would really like to ... that’s why I think like, mystery, kind of?*

**5.1.5.6 Finding My Way Back Home.** Benjamin reflected on a turning point in his life. He spoke about a significant event in which he and his friends planned to run away from home. Thinking back on it, he feels that he was not thinking clearly:

*I don’t know what was wrong with me, but last year I was ... I was planning things with my friend [name omitted]. We were going to run away. I don’t know where we were going to go. Like, really stupid thing to think.*

Thinking about what may have initially led to the decision, Benjamin mentioned that things were not going well for him at the time. During the interview, Benjamin

frequently mentioned wanting to be “free”. He said, “*I kind of wanted to get away. I kind of wanted to just, like, be out there, have fun with friends and like, just be able to like, be free*”. By chance, his aunt scrolled through his cell phone. She noticed the social media conversation in which Benjamin was planning to run away. Ironically, his aunt subsequently set tighter boundaries and restricted his social media use, which limited his freedom even more. This turning point created significant stress in his relationship with his aunt, which accumulated in her hiring a private investigator to probe what was happening between Benjamin and his friend. Benjamin did not elaborate on why this investigation happened or what other concerns his aunt had at the time. He merely mentioned that they felt that he would put the family in harm’s way.

What does seem evident though is that Benjamin’s friend influenced him to think negatively about his family. However, his family’s reaction at the time of this episode brought Benjamin to a place where he perceived their actions as supportive and loving:

*I learnt, I learnt like, like I just said, I can’t always do whatever I want and always want to do whatever I want. I, I learnt that like, I’ve got a great family; I’ve got a great [inaudible], and I don’t want to get rid of this. I don’t want to lose all of this. I don’t want to lose all these people that love me and things.*

A turning point for Benjamin was moving in with his great-grandmother, grandmother, and aunts. With more space available in his new home and the extra attention that he now receives, Benjamin feels that the move was a positive step in his life. Furthermore, Benjamin mentioned that he enjoyed his great-grandmother’s stories about the past.

**5.1.5.7 At Least I Knew They Were Fake.** Benjamin, an extroverted young man, narrated various stories of connection and betrayal in relation to his friends. Relationships are essential to him, especially those formed at school. However, Benjamin had already

changed school five times. He indicated that he had several close friends who are important to him at the school that he is currently attending. He mentioned how his friends would “*have his back*” and how important trust was between him and them.

However, Benjamin spoke about a significant event in his life as having to understand and come to terms with friends who had betrayed his confidence. He referred to them as snakes and people who had deceived and double-crossed him. Benjamin felt that he had allowed himself to be vulnerable and referred to this episode in his life as difficult. He felt the safest with his friends and initially, had felt comfortable sharing his secrets with them. However, when it transpired that his friends had formed a separate group chat and gossiped about him, Benjamin felt betrayed:

*[I]t hurt me. But at least I knew that they were fake, so that they had a group chat I wasn't in. We all had a group chat together, but that is a separate one. And they kept talking bad about me and things.*

Reflecting on the experience, Benjamin felt that he could forgive his friends but he would not trust them again.

In summary, it is evident that early parental loss resulted in a series of changes and losses for Benjamin. For example, his mother left behind her children shortly after his father died. Benjamin's inability to recall episodic memories of his father does not negate his wish for a father figure. From the stories told to him about his father, he perceives him as a fun-loving individual. Hence, he has built up an imagined picture of how it would have been if his father were still alive. Benjamin also expressed specific developmental needs for greater independence and freedom, yet he interprets the boundaries set by his caregivers as a form of overprotectiveness due to them having lost his father in a motor vehicle accident. Therefore, not only does he feel deprived of a life in which he could bond with a father around fun activities but also feels frustrated by his female caregivers being

overprotective of him. However, he also appreciates that they are concerned about him and want him to be safe and happy. Ironically, as much as he says he is not affected by his father's loss, his absence has irrevocably changed his life. Moreover, according to Benjamin, there appears to be secrets about his parents that his grandmother hides. Hence, Benjamin has many unanswered questions, making his life story more complicated. Despite the challenges, he is trying to find a sense of agency on the basketball court to help him cope with life. He hopes to find a connection in his friendships, but he does not know if he can trust his friends. He is afraid of the betrayal that may come. After all, he has experienced much disloyalty from his friends over the years.

#### ***5.1.6 Bandile: "There's No One Who Wants to Explain What Happened"***

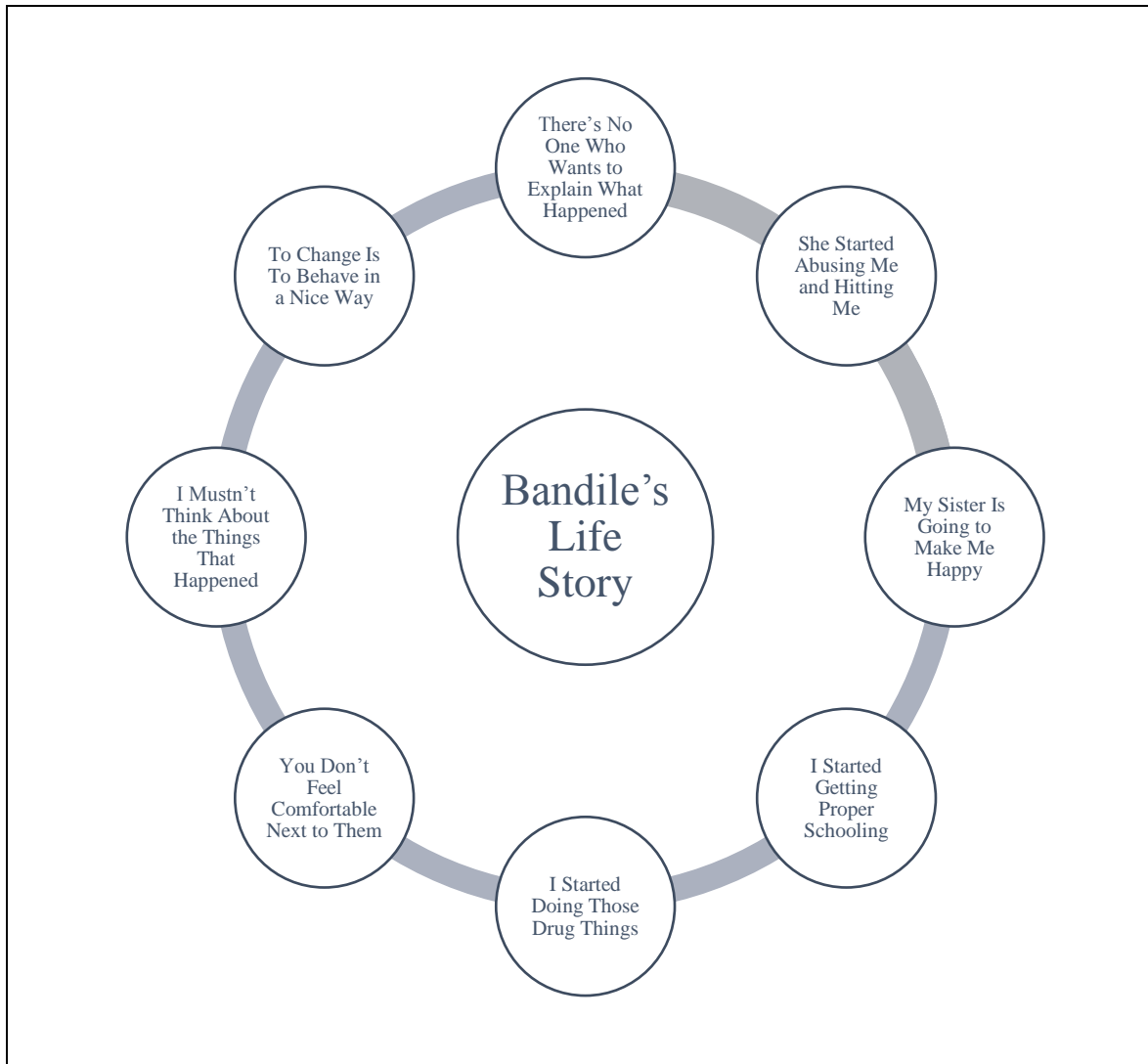
Bandile is an 18-year-old black male. He is currently in Grade 10 and resides in a childcare facility in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg. With no adult family members available to take care of him, Bandile was placed in a residential childcare facility that he now calls home. It was evident that Bandile was timid and withdrawn, and he seemed hesitant at first to share his story. In addition, it was apparent from the outset that Bandile was unable to comprehend the metaphor of a life story consisting of chapters and significant life events, despite his level of English proficiency. He found it challenging to share his story using metaphorical and abstract language.

During the interview, Bandile reported that at the age of only two months, he experienced the loss of his biological parents. As a result of not having had his parents in his life, Bandile suffered significant traumas at the hands of inconsistent and punitive caregivers. It, therefore, can be assumed that he experienced attachment ruptures early in his life. A unique aspect of his story is that family members could not tell him what happened to his parents or how they had died. Therefore, Bandile could not elaborate on

the loss of his parents in any detail. To this day, Bandile does not know the circumstances around his parents' death.

**Figure 9**

*Visual Display of Bandile's Narrative Themes*



**5.1.6.1 There's No One Who Wants to Explain What Happened.** According to Bandile, he lost both of his parents when he was only two months old. It was difficult for Bandile to articulate the story of his parent's death. Nevertheless, it was clear that the loss of his parents changed his life in irrevocable ways. The event brought many changes to Bandile's life, but he prefers not to think about them anymore. Reflecting on the circumstances surrounding his parents' death, Bandile mentioned that he knows almost

nothing about their passing. He noted, *“It’s very difficult because there’s no one who wants to explain what happened to my mother and my father because when I ask them, all of them, they tell me that they don’t know what happened”*. His only information is that his mother passed away when he was two months old. Bandile assumes that his father also passed away, but nobody has been able to tell him about the circumstances of his death.

**5.1.6.2 She Started Abusing Me and Hitting Me.** Bandile experienced adverse experiences in his early development. In his story, there is a sense of him being abandoned and neglected by family members before his placement at the centre. Although he lived with his great-grandmother for a short while, he does not know his family background. In the absence of involved, loving family members, Bandile also has a limited understanding of his cultural background. For example, when speaking about the meaning of his name, which is often central to many African cultures, he said, *“There’s no one who have explained to me what’s the meaning of my name”*. At one point in his early life, Bandile was with his aunt, a young person at the time. This was a challenging time for Bandile since he was subjected to a significant amount of emotional and physical abuse:

*My aunty, the one that used to stay with me, she started abusing me and hitting me, not giving me food, sleeping outside even when it was raining, and cleaning. Maybe like three times and hitting me with a broom and things like that.*

**5.1.6.3 My Sister Is Going to Make Me Happy.** Bandile experienced significant losses throughout his life, including the loss of his biological parents when he was only two months old. This placed Bandile’s life on a trajectory characterised by much adversity. For example, Bandile was placed in his great-grandmother’s care after his parents passed away. However, she fell ill in 2015 and passed away. Bandile was then left in the care of his aunt, who at the time also lived with them. She seemed unable to provide the consistent care and love that Bandile needed. Shortly after his great-grandmother passed away, his

aunt started abusing Bandile: *“She [my aunt] started abusing me and hitting me, not giving me food, sleeping outside even when it’s raining”*. With his maternal grandmother unable to take care of him, the aunt had no choice but to place Bandile in a childcare centre in Gauteng. With almost no family to support him, Bandile held onto the hope that his sister would be the one who would take care of him and help him. Bandile spoke fondly of his sister who played an essential role in his life. At one point, she assured him that she would be able to take care of him:

*She [my sister] used to tell me that I must look up to her as my mother and everything. She’s going to take this role of being my mother and things like that. She’s going to make me happy. She’s going to buy everything that I want. She’s also going to help me at school.*

Bandile mentioned that he has not spoken to her for many months, but he hopes that he will be able to do so in the future.

**5.1.6.4 I Started Getting Proper Schooling.** Bandile has experienced a significant amount of upheaval in his life, including disrupted schooling. He shared his story of staying with different caregivers and undergoing numerous changes of school. According to Bandile, he experienced a severe injury in Grade 2 during a game that he was playing with his friends. He recalls, *“They took me to a hospital, so I slept there, I think, for two weeks or three weeks. So I didn’t get a chance to write exam. So when I came back, they were like, I can’t write exam”*. As a result, he had to repeat Grade 2. Later in his schooling career, his education was again interrupted after the school burnt down, forcing him to take a *“gap year”* as he calls it.

However, a social worker became aware that Bandile was not in school and managed to get a placement at the childcare centre where he currently resides. This enabled him to be placed in a nearby school: *“So that’s when they take me to this side, and*

*then, when they took me to this side, that's when everything changed. That's when I started getting proper schooling".* Bandile mentioned that he enjoys school and especially likes Visual Arts, which allows him to develop his artistic skills.

**5.1.6.5 I Started Doing Those Drug Things.** Bandile found adapting to the unfamiliar school environment challenging and started acting out. Moreover, he had begun to mingle with disengaged peers from school. For example, he and his friend would slip away from the childcare centre and buy marijuana. Bandile used marijuana for almost four years, and this affected his schooling. Because of this substance abuse, he found it challenging to engage in school: *"You struggle to think, and it makes you like, a bad person in the community"*. When his grandmother was informed by the centre of Bandile's substance abuse, it upset her:

*I didn't used to enjoy [drugs] at first, and I didn't use[d] to see my sister. And they used to refuse for me to see my sister. So the time when I started doing those drug things, my granny, she warned me that I must stop doing that. And then that's when I started changing them.*

Bandile believes that his grandmother's threats made him realise that he had to stop his behaviour: *"[S]he's [my grandmother] the one who came in, told me if I do the things like last time, she's going to kick me out of her house—I must not come back to her house"*. Bandile feared losing the only person whom he could still call family.

**5.1.6.6 You Don't Feel Comfortable Next to Them.** For Bandile, some conversations relating to his parents are deeply uncomfortable and unsettling for him: *"It's when maybe like someone's, like swear at me about my mother and things like that"*. As a result, he is unable to deal with situations such as these satisfactorily. He often feels isolated and excluded when the other children at the centre speak about their families.

Nevertheless, at this point in his life, Bandile's religious beliefs seem to compensate for what he is missing:

*It's very difficult because when people talk about their father and mother as parents, you don't feel comfortable next to them when they are talking about it. I just tell myself that even though it's not bad, that if I have God and everything like that, that God is going to be my mother and my father.*

**5.1.6.7 I Mustn't Think About the Things That Happened.** While discussing memories, Bandile immediately spoke about the loss related to his parent's death. Because of the loss of his parents, he felt different from other children in many ways. This bothered him; however, as he grew older, others told him not to reflect on his past:

*I used to look at other kids having their parents and things like that. So also, I used to want to also have parents. But when time goes on, they told me I mustn't think about the things that happened in the past. I must think about the future and fix my life.*

Bandile believes that it is best to forget the past. For Bandile, reminiscing and thinking about the past is a distraction from his future successes:

*I think it's going to be helpful because if I keep on thinking of the past, it is the thing that's going to make me not think of the future. It's the things that make me not go to the successful things.*

Being good and happy helps him to avoid thinking about the past. His hobbies allow him to shift his thoughts away from upsetting past experiences: "*Sometimes when I'm drawing or sometimes when I'm playing soccer with my friends, that's the thing that makes me happy most*".

**5.1.6.8 To Change Is to Behave Good in a Nice Way.** Bandile could not elaborate much on the different chapters of his life. Perhaps, this is in part because of the limited life

experiences outside of the trauma that he experienced. But now, Bandile says that he is happy. He hopes to fulfil his future career and have a family one day. For him, there is the past, which he describes as “*bad*,” and there is the present, which he describes as “*good*”. Currently, his participation in the soccer team brings him much joy. As for his future, Bandile voiced uncertainty and apprehension about what lies ahead for him. Despite this, he believes that by being “*good*”, he will be able to achieve his goals. He knows that he wants to get a good education, hopefully in engineering, which he hopes will open up opportunities for him. He also intends to promote soccer for those with the condition of dwarfism: “*I just thought about it because any time when I look at the TV, there’s no sport for dwarf people. So, me, I just wanted to open a sport for dwarf people so they can be like us*”. However, more importantly, Bandile wants to be a good person since he was “*naughty*” when he was young: “*I’ve changed a lot because when I was young, I’ve been naughty and things like that. So now, I think the thing that made to change is to behave good in a nice way*”.

In summary: Bandile expressed the need to hear stories about his deceased parents that could ultimately help him to make sense of his life and his loss. Without a consistent and loving family, Bandile has little information on which to build a cohesive life story. Moreover, the abuse by a family member and other caregivers probably resulted in a worldview characterised as unpredictable and unsafe. Furthermore, the disruptive events in his life have contributed to him feeling alienated from other peers who often talk about their families. In his story, this bereaved and traumatised young man still seeks the comfort and safety of someone who will love and care for him. He hopes his sister will fulfil the maternal role despite not having seen her for many months. For now, he is grateful that he has found a home. However, because of his age, the thought of leaving the centre soon

weighs heavily on him. He believes that if he is good and behaves while not thinking about his past, things will turn out well.

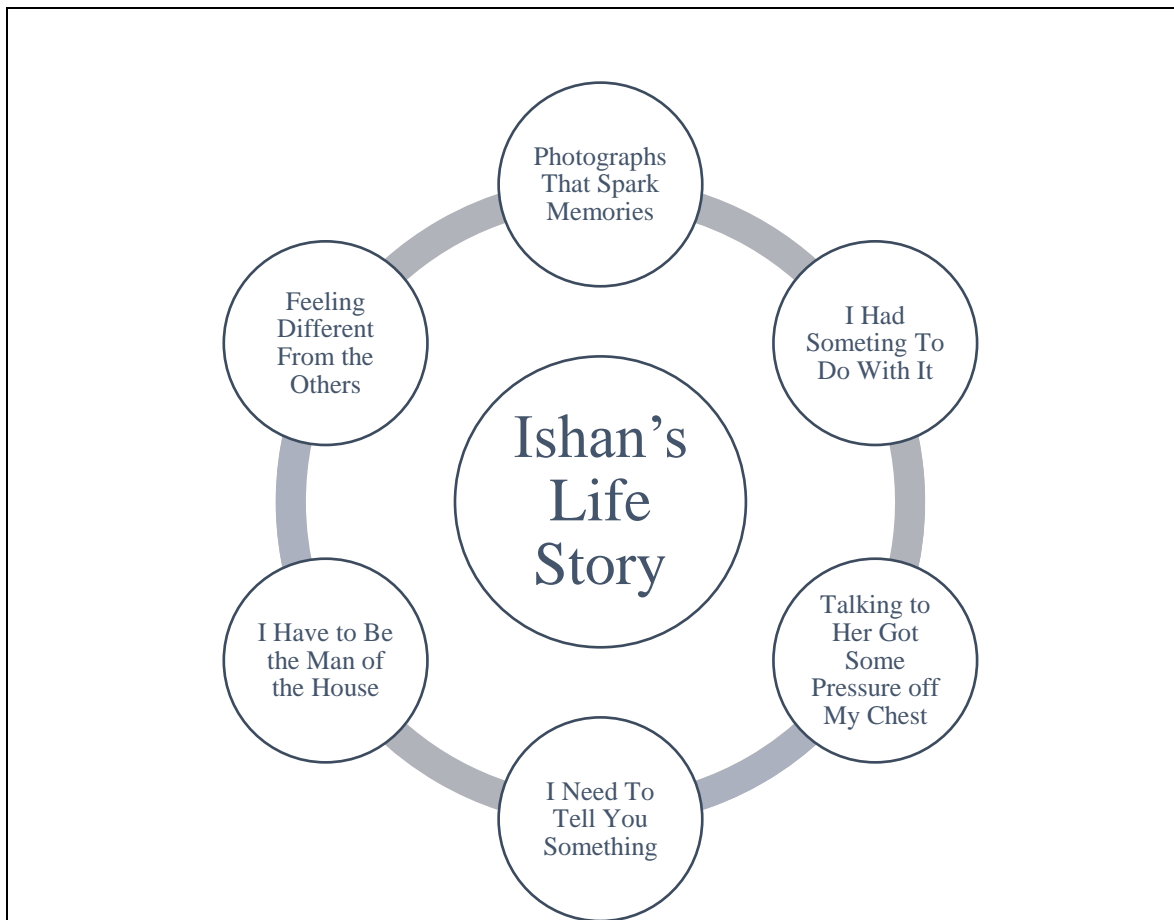
**5.1.7 Ishan: “I Have to Be the Man of the House”**

Ishan is a 15-year-old Indian male living with his mother. He is an only child. In the interview, Ishan presented as a cheerful yet sensitive young man who was eager to engage in the conversation. He seemed to be meticulous and neat. Furthermore, Ishan appeared to be thoughtful in his responses and was open to disclosing his experiences, even those that may have been difficult for him.

His father, a medical doctor, passed away when he was approximately 10 years old. He recalled that his father had passed away approximately a year after his parents were divorced. As he was busy doing his homework, he could hear his mother having a conversation on the telephone. Initially, he thought she was laughing, only to realise moments later that she was crying. His mother shared the news with him that his father had passed away from a heart attack. The shock was overwhelming for Ishan.

**Figure 10**

*Visual Display of Ishan's Narrative Themes*



**5.1.7.1 Photographs That Spark Memories.** Ishan reflected on the important chapters in his life story and mentioned that reuniting with family was a highlight for him. Thinking about his immediate family, Ishan said that he shares a close relationship with his mother who is a teacher. His extended family, especially the maternal side, has become increasingly crucial to Ishan over the last few years. On his mother's side, Ishan was the first grandchild. He has a close relationship with his maternal grandparents. Although there appears to have been some degree of paternal family estrangement, Ishan was able to reconnect with his paternal cousins in 2015: *"A few years back, I was looking at the albums, and then there were certain photos that sparked memories. So, I'm like, 'Oh I didn't know I did this with them'"*. In thinking about his father's family, Ishan also recalls

that his paternal grandparents died when he was three years old. Ishan's family has shared many stories about his father with him. In many ways, he is very similar to his father, who was a medical doctor. His caring, outgoing nature and his kindness towards others are characteristics that Ishan is proud to have inherited from his father. At several points in the interview, Ishan mentioned that he would one day like to travel the world and aimed to become a doctor like his father. He is ambitious and academically focused and made several references to how important a good work ethic is to him.

**5.1.7.2 I Had Something to Do with It.** Ishan recalled his childhood and narrated stories of not only hardship but also joy and connection. In the interview, he mentioned that some high points in his life were memories of being on holiday with his parents. He said these were times when *“both of them [his parents] were together with me. We were having a good time. There were no problems”*. He said that this was when he felt happy and had a sense of belonging. However, Ishan's parents experienced much strain in their relationship. When he was in Grade 3, the relationship between his parents rapidly deteriorated, and this was a critical time in Ishan's life. Much of the conflict between his parents revolved around finances. As a result of arguments between his parents in the mornings, Ishan, a conscientious individual, started arriving at school much later than usual. These late comings resulted in him being marked absent or late for almost 21 days in his Grade 3 year.

In addition, Ishan felt that he was to blame for the conflict between his parents: *“Somehow, I felt like I had ... I had something to do with it because, like, they'd be fighting”*. He continued,

*What's going to happen to me? Because, like, you guys are going to split apart.*

*Where am I going to go? So I think, yeah, I had a sense of guilt that I was part of it.*

*But, um, sometimes I just felt, let me just stay out of this. Let me, like, go outside and play or something, just to get my mind off it.*

The parental tension escalated to the point that Ishan's parents went to court, which was exceptionally challenging for Ishan and created a significant amount of anxiety for him. He became very concerned about missing school and who would fetch him from school when his parents were in court. He recalled, *"It happened quite bad at the start of Grade 3 because on my report I was 21 days absent or late because they were always fighting"*. Although Ishan was not involved with any of the actual court proceedings, they remained a source of stress for him. After his parents had finalised the divorce, Ishan had little contact with his father. Both Ishan's parents became involved in other relationships after the divorce. Ishan mentioned that he was, in essence, at ease about this. Specifically, he was happy with his mother's new friend since this meant that there was another male figure in the house, which Ishan believed was necessary at the time.

**5.1.7.3 Talking to Her Got Some Pressure off My Chest.** Ishan always considered school to be a place where he felt safe. Being a hardworking student, he always had good relationships with his teachers. During the period in which Ishan's parents were experiencing extreme tension, his Grade 3 teacher provided invaluable help by supporting him in this challenging time. He said:

*Most probably talking to the teacher in Grade 3 because her and Mom always used to talk and whatever. So I could see she was good friends. And then, I think, she did come to know about it somehow, and whatever. But me talking to her at least got some pressure off my chest. And then, all the teachers, they would say, 'Are you okay?'*

**5.1.7.4 I Need to Tell You Something.** Ishan recalled the day he found out that his father had passed away. It was approximately a year after his parents were divorced. As he

was busy doing his homework, he could hear his mother having a conversation. At first, he thought she was laughing, but it soon became apparent that she was crying. Ishan recalls,

*So the girlfriend phoned, so maybe like 10:00 in the morning. So she was crying. And then I asked her, 'Is everything okay?' And she's like, 'I'll tell you just now'. And that's when she went to go shower. She changed. And then that's when I just finished the work. And then she's like, 'I need to tell you something'.*

His mother proceeded to tell him that his father had passed away from a heart attack. Since his father was a Hindu, the funeral followed soon after his death. Ishan has vivid memories of the day and remembers feeling overwhelmed by everyone asking him if he was okay. The cremation was especially difficult for him: *"When we went inside, I was so so. And the, I think, when they say the final thing before they send it [the coffin] into the back, I think that's when I let it [emotions] out again".* There was a significant outpouring of condolences from the community. Ishan believed that his father was loved and appreciated by his community. He recalls specifically how the days unfolded after his father's passing. When Ishan returned to school, his mother informed the school staff about his father's death. He recalled that his peers and teachers supported him and wanted to know how he was doing. He did not want to display any emotion but felt supported and cared for by his teachers and peers.

**5.1.7.5 I Have to Be the Man of the House.** One of the significant changes that occurred after his father's passing involved moving to a smaller house. Ishan mentioned that this change was not easy at first, but they accepted the reality that they needed to downscale. However, he still feels a connection with their previous house: *"So then every time we pass that way [the way of the previous house], we always look there, and I'm like no matter what happens, it will always be my home. Because these are where the memories happened".*

For Ishan, his father's passing also brought isolation and a sense that he would now be responsible for his own future:

*But then after he passed away, I think that's when I realised that okay, I'm on my own. I'm with Mom; I'll have to push because here on out, it's just her and I. And I'm just thinking, okay, I want to become a doctor; Dad's looking over me, so I want to fulfil that dream. So keep pushing, no matter what.*

In many ways, Ishan also felt that his father's death made him realise that he would need to take on more responsibilities:

*[A]fter he passed away, and I'm like, okay, now I'm on my own. I'm with Mom. I have to be the man of the house. So, I'm like, okay, now I have to put my like, I have to put responsibilities first. And if I do something, there is going to be a consequence.*

Ishan goes on to talk about examples of how he would remind his mother to fix things around their house. He also spoke about how he has become more mindful when spending money. For example, he would not buy the "biggest" food items at school camps. He would rather be frugal in his spending. He also mentioned that "if I did have money, then I'd buy ... If it was something nice, I'd buy it for her [his mother]". Finances remain a significant source of concern for him.

**5.1.7.6 Feeling Different from the Others.** As he reflected on how his father's passing had affected him, Ishan mentioned that he used to be quite friendly. However, since his father's death, he had become more cautious around people. He indicated that although he would still be cordial towards a person, he would not be over-friendly and accommodating. Ishan also said that he does not like to share with others that he lost his father:

*I won't show that I've lost a parent. Like I would ... I'm like still the person that I want to express myself as. But when, if it gets to the point where they were like, okay, like, where's Mom and Dad? Only if that happens, then I would say, I'm like, 'Oh no, he passed away like four years ago'.*

Ishan added that society also expects boys to be strong when dealing with grief and not to show emotions such as sadness. Indeed, he believes that others bully boys when they show their feelings: *"I think there is a certain point in society that prevents you from saying what you want to say and being yourself"*. However, there are times when Ishan feels he could share what he has experienced with others. Nevertheless, he often feels ambivalent about sharing this part of his life story.

Ishan mentioned that he sometimes feels different from his peers, almost transparent. He thinks that not having a father in his life makes him different from his peers:

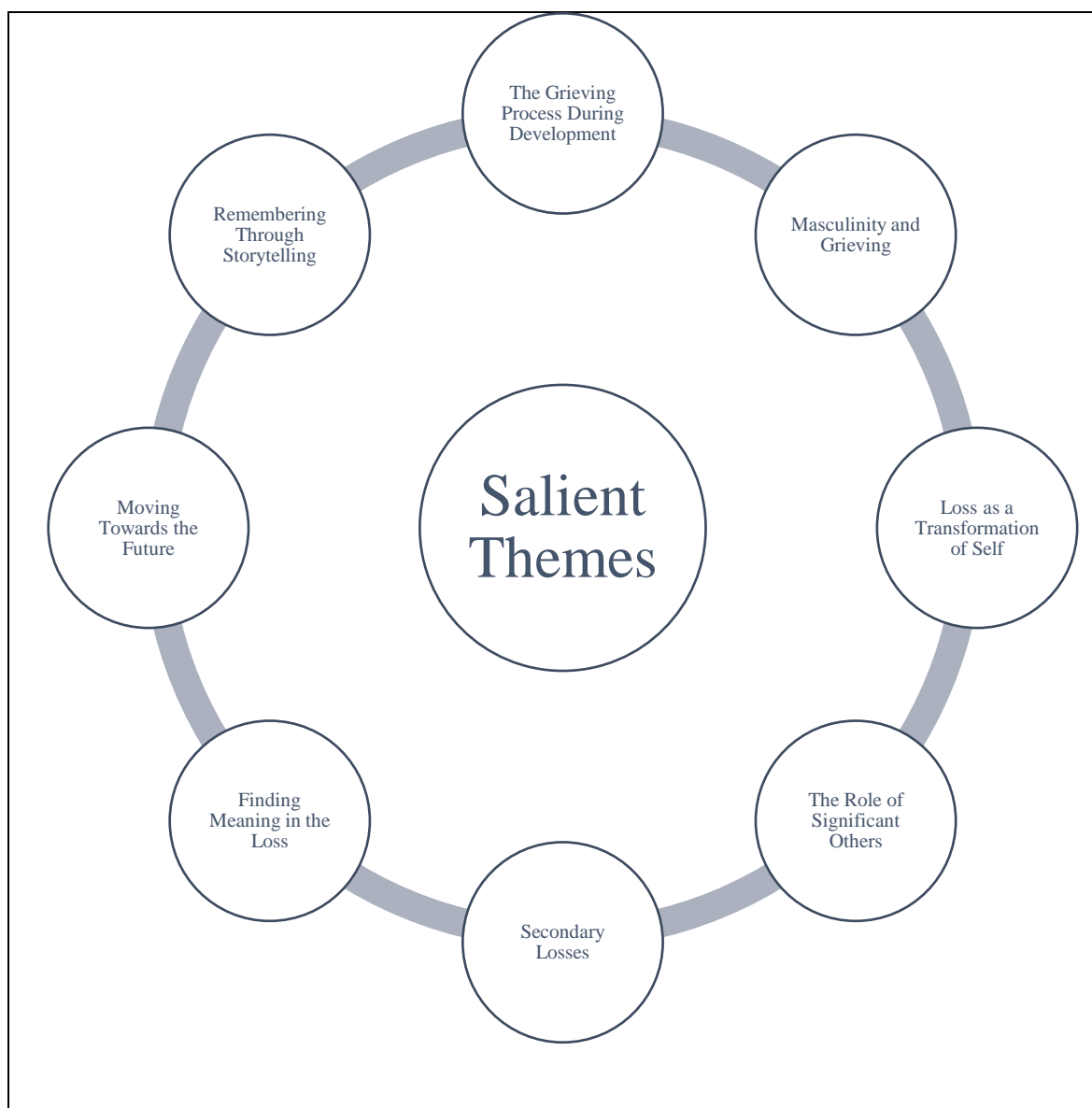
*Well, I think it's good. But then in a way, I feel that I'm kind of not, not seen out as like, a person. But for myself, I feel like I'm very different because I don't have a dad. It's like, there's certain things that—let's just say for boys, there's certain things that you do with your dad, and you'd have experienced it. But then for me, what I feel is that I'm different because I haven't experienced those things well.*

In summary, most of Ishan's memories and significant life chapters revolved around the trauma of his parents' divorce. It created uncertainty and unpredictability in his world and must have been an extremely challenging time for him. Moreover, even to this day, he views himself as the one who is to blame for the conflict at home. Although he tried to make things better at home, he felt that he was not able to stop the arguing between his parents. However, his story also shows the immense comfort that he found in a teacher who was willing to listen to him. School became a safe place in contrast with his home

environment that had become increasingly chaotic with his parents fighting most of the time. In fact, immersing himself in his academics provided Ishan with a degree of agency and control. Eventually, his parents got divorced. However, a few years later, his father passed away. By now, Ishan must have had many conflicting feelings towards his father. He had little contact with his father after the divorce and came to believe that his father was also to blame for the divorce. Thus, his father's death was not as devastating as he would have expected. It was, however, challenging for him to take on the new role of emotional support for his mother and being 'the man of the house'. As time went on, Ishan had a strong need to stay connected with both sides of his parent's families. Reconciling with his paternal side of the family was an especially important part of his story. The stories and photographs helped him to stay emotionally connected with his father.

## **5.2 Themes Across the Narratives**

Based on the analysis of the individual interviews and the construction of related themes, salient themes were constructed across all interviews. The eight salient themes revealed the narratives of late adolescent males who lost a parent. These themes were actively constructed by considering the patterns of meaning reflected in the seven narratives. However, the stories remained intact as holistic interpretations of the individual stories to create a meta-story. This meta-story represents the shared voices of late adolescent males as they continue to make meaning of their loss. The eight salient themes are presented in Figure 11.

**Figure 11***Visual Depiction of Salient Themes*

### ***5.2.1 The Grieving Process Since the Loss***

In this research study, most participants felt that the grieving process following the loss of a parent was a central part of their lives. However, the intensity, duration, and expression were markedly different for each participant, indicating variability in the experience of loss. Furthermore, the participants found different ways of coping. For

example, some participants spoke about the ongoing nature of grief. Although many felt that it becomes easier to deal with grief over time, it can sometimes unexpectedly precipitate many challenging feelings. Thus, the experience of grief seems to fluctuate. Some participants have moments of realising the finality of not being able to see their parent/s again. For many participants, it is difficult to cope with loss and to accept that the person is gone. For example, Harry's words strikingly summarise his grief journey, as he, similar to the other participants, oscillates between feelings of loss and moving on with his life. As Harry states, *"There are times when I'm doing fine, and I just don't really think about it, but there are times when it really hits me"*.

The participants also commented that they do not always feel ready to move on in their grief journey. They experienced a sense that the world was moving forward despite their loss. For example, John described his grief as ongoing although the world has moved on. Despite his position that the world should move on, he feels that his family will always have to live with the reality that his father is gone forever. For now, Harry uses his sport and music to connect him to his deep feelings of loss.

Michael also mentioned that he often has moments when he feels overwhelmed by a sense of unreality regarding his mother's death. During these times, he has strange thoughts about the possibility of his mother not being dead. There are moments when the reality of his loss is too much to bear.

In contrast, the grieving process is different for participants who have no recollections of their deceased parents. For example, Oliver's sadness over losing his mother was triggered during the funerals of family members. Beyond that, he does not seem to think about losing his mother often. Benjamin also lost his father when he was too young to remember the event. Although his grieving process does not involve expressing feelings around his loss, he has built a memorial stand in his room where he

displays the funeral letters of all his loved ones, including his father. This reminds him of those who loved him.

Instead of expressing their grief, Bandile and Ishan try to avoid thinking about their losses. Bandile declared, *“I must not think about the things that happened in the past. I must think about the future and fix my life”*. Ishan also prefers to avoid thinking about the loss of his father.

Participants also reflected on the emotional experience of grieving. Some participants felt regret over not being better behaved when they were with their deceased parent. For example, Michael spoke about being a ‘good kid’. Moreover, some participants thought they were to blame for their parent’s death. Others expressed regret about not making their parents proud due to underachievement. Harry felt he should have tried harder at his rugby to make his father proud while he was still alive.

John thought he should have made his parents happier. He believed that it would have stopped the arguments at home. Many participants regret not having spent more time with their deceased parent. This remains a major regret for many of the participants. Ishan felt he was to blame for the difficulties his parents experienced in their marriage:

*“Somehow, I felt like I had something to do with it because they’d be fighting”*. More concerning is that some participants feel that there is not much they can do to control these feelings of guilt.

Participants often discussed how they dissociated from their emotions to cope with the changes and feelings related to their loss. They described scenarios in which they felt a sense of being detached from themselves and their emotions. Some participants experienced significant stress and problems in their relationships, And some thought they could not cope with the stressors in their lives. They suffered a feeling of emptiness after their parent had died. John mentioned, *“Life’s different because you feel the sense of also,*

*you're like there's something empty in you*". Regardless of how participants dealt with their grief, be it feeling the emotions or actively avoiding them, it was evident that their loss shaped their day-to-day lived experiences.

### ***5.2.2 Masculinity and Grieving***

The adolescent males in this study felt that gender roles play a role in the grieving process. Most participants understood gender roles as the expectation to suppress emotion. Some participants, for example, voiced how men's mental health is ignored and that society treats grieving males differently. They felt it is a stereotype to expect men to be strong and manly. They wanted an opportunity to acknowledge their loss and have it validated by those who matter to them.

Some participants also mentioned that society tends to withdraw support from men early in the grieving process. Participants spoke about their experiences of how their support networks initially were beneficial and provided support. With time, however, fewer friends offered help, and only occasional conversations took place about their loss. In some cases, friends and families silenced conversations around loss. Harry, for example, mentioned the following:

*But it definitely is said frequently in other ways such as you need to stop being so negative. I was told that by [a] really close friend at one point and that, that really stung a lot. That caused me to be a lot more closed about how I feel in general with other people as well.*

Ishan added that expressing his feelings about loss and other related issues that make him emotional would place him at risk:

*Yeah. I think like sometimes, if you are sad, for example, at school, if you had to show that you're sad, then stereotypical boys, they will bully you. They would say,*

*'Why are you sad?' And they would pick on you to say that you're a boy, you're not supposed to be sad. We are supposed to be manly men.*

Despite the traditionally masculine roles, participants mainly felt that society is shifting its gender role expectations. Oliver, for example, mentioned that he believes society is becoming more accepting in general as it becomes more progressive. Other participants believed that society does not always discriminate between the grieving processes of males and females. John feels that society does not necessarily treat males differently from females concerning grief:

*I think when you know someone's going through something like that, you know that they're going to grieve; you know that they're going to be upset. So I don't think that society would do anything like that. I think it's the same for boys and girls.*

Overall, the participants felt that as human beings, people do not experience loss in significantly different ways. Oliver, for example, said, *"But everybody grieves the same way, the same amount"*. Similarly, when reflecting on society's role in shaping the grief experiences between the different genders, Michael indicated, *"I think it's the same for boys and girls"*.

### **5.2.3 Loss as a Transformation of Self**

Participants referred to their sense of changing in significant ways following their parent's death. The loss of their loved one affected how they perceived themselves in the aftermath of their loss. For some, the changes were subtle. For others, the loss transformed them. For example, Harry has changed how he interacts with people, especially his younger sister. He is much more relaxed with her and does not engage in arguments as he did before. He reflected, *"But I have really changed a lot of small habits and looking back at stuff, I've changed a lot more than I realise"*.

John mentioned that his life had changed forever, and he believes that it would be challenging for him to return to the way he was. He feels angry, lonely, and empty after his father's death. According to John, he has become quieter and more withdrawn and does not share his feelings easily. Moreover, he feels a sense of being different from his peers. Although John struggles to come to terms with his father's death, he mentioned that he has become more patient and empathetic towards other people's feelings. He maintains that he values relationships more after the traumatic loss of his father. Furthermore, John believes that his father's death has led him to appreciate every day and to see life events in perspective.

Michael also believes that his mother's death and the mental health struggles that followed made him more introspective. He disclosed, "*[What] has changed ... was that, I like to, to dig deep into my thoughts and sometimes, I've even seen myself as, you know, crazy and you know*". He believes he has also become more empathetic to the emotional pain of others. Oliver believes his mother's death indirectly shaped his sense of self. His father had to work exceptionally hard to raise him after losing his wife and Oliver's mother. Consequently, Oliver has developed immense gratitude for everything he has.

Yet for Benjamin, there have been little subjective changes within himself. He is not aware of any changes after losing his father. However, he feels that his brother has been more affected by the loss than he has. However, Benjamin did articulate how his life circumstances changed after losing his father.

Bandile also did not explicitly link how parental loss has shaped his life. For him, not thinking about the past is a way to cope with his current reality. He believes that the only positive change in his life was when he learnt to be a 'good boy'. Despite living in a care facility where his peers experience similar difficulties, Bandile carries a profound sense of being different.

### 5.2.4 *The Role of Significant Others*

In the interviews, several participants referred to their relationships with the people who were essential in their lives. It was common for them to refer to their surviving parent, their teachers, and their peers. For some participants, these relationships with significant others were a source of support whereas for others, they were a source of stress.

When reflecting on their surviving parent, many participants indicated they were concerned about their surviving parent in the aftermath of the loss. Subsequently, some participants felt they needed to minimise their feelings and take care of their parent. Oliver voiced his concern over his father's well-being and stated that he had inadvertently become a sounding board for his father. Similar to some other participants, he felt that his father, as the surviving parent, needed more support than he did after the loss. John also mentioned that his mother and sister found it incredibly difficult to come to terms with the loss. Communication between John and his mother completely broke down after his father's passing. As a result, there is no conversation about his father in the home. John is angry towards his mother since he feels that she is to blame for his untimely death. Michael also indicated that his father struggled significantly after his mother passed away, and he initially felt abandoned by his father: *"My dad got really depressed, and it was quite difficult until a year had passed"*. Michael believes that this led him to distance himself: *"I mean I've learnt to detach my emotions from people, and an interesting thing that I've noticed is I find it difficult to love"*. As the participants reflected on their relationship with their surviving parent, many felt that they should be well behaved and support their surviving parent in all possible ways. They also thought that the emotional impact of their parent's death left their surviving parent vulnerable. In many ways, they took over the role of caregiver. For example, Harry and Ishan would take responsibility for morning routines and help around the house.

Family members often played an important part in the participants' life stories. Oliver's paternal grandparents and aunts played a pivotal role in his upbringing after his mother died. He is proud that he comes from a lineage of strong women whom he refers to as 'feminists'. Benjamin also feels that his family members play an essential role. However, he is experiencing frustration because they do not allow him much freedom. Benjamin believes their overprotectiveness stems from the loss of his father. Conversely, Bandile expressed that he has no family to look after him. He, however, hopes his sister will return one day and be like a mother to him. He has a few memories where his sister took care of him for a short while and hopes that he will be able to have her in his life in the future.

In many participants' stories, teachers often played an essential role in helping them cope with their loss and shape their life stories. For John, school and his relationship with his teachers provided a sense of consistency and safety after his father passed away. Harry felt inspired and supported by the male teachers, especially after his father's death. He said they embodied the character traits that he aspired to cultivate in himself. Michael mentioned how one teacher's comment about him being the future head boy had stayed with him and inspired him to become a leader. Ishan had experienced immense trauma during his parent's divorce and he spoke in-depth about his Grade 3 teacher, the only adult who understood his difficulties. In contrast, it can be deduced from Benjamin and Bandile's stories that they did not have positive school experiences or supportive relationships with their teachers. They also changed schools many times over the years and did not have the opportunity to form long-standing bonds with teachers. Hence, they did not refer to any of their teachers as a source of support.

Peers also held an interesting space in the participant's life stories. Some participants felt different from their peers since their parent/s had died. They felt that their

peers perceived them as lacking because of their loss. Michael, for example, said, “*I’ve never seen myself as the same, and I often find myself thinking, ‘I just want to relate to my friends’. I feel like I’m out of my age group a lot of the time*”. Both Benjamin and Ishan felt isolated from other male friends. Ishan divulged,

*I feel like I’m very different because I don’t have a dad. It’s like there’s certain things that—let’s just say for boys, there’s certain things that you do with your dad, and you’d have experienced it. But then for me, what I feel is that I’m different because I haven’t experienced those things well.*

For Harry, a sense of belonging has always been important. Although his friends were initially supportive when his father died, they soon encouraged him to stop speaking about his loss since they felt he was being negative. He also began to argue with friends, which resulted in him being more isolated during the initial few months after his father had passed away. He, however, found support within his faith community, which has been life changing for him. Friends were also a central theme in Benjamin’s story. Although not related to his loss, he spoke about sharing his feelings with a friend who betrayed his trust. His narrative clearly shows that he finds it challenging to navigate the demands of friendships and still seems to search for friends who reflect his interests and values. Bandile also expressed that he initially joined a group at the care centre where he currently resides. However, giving in to the peer pressure of this group, he soon became involved in substance use with these friends. He has subsequently ended these relationships. However, he feels isolated from his peers, especially when they speak about their extended family members who love them.

### **5.2.5 Secondary Losses**

The participants spoke about not only experiencing the direct loss of their parent/s but also the secondary losses such as changes in relationships, routines, schools, family

finances, and lifestyle. In addition, some participants shared their thoughts on how they imagined their lives would have been different without the loss of their parent/s. Oliver, for example, was musing over how he might not have been an only child and had siblings.

For many participants, parental loss also changed how the family members related to each other. In some cases such as Oliver's, some family members stopped contact altogether. John also expressed how his family has drifted apart. Michael and his father were initially estranged after his mother passed away, while Benjamin experienced the trauma of his mother abandoning her children after his father died. Their stories highlight how often family dynamics change after a person dies within that family system.

Participants also shared how in some way, the loss of a parent caused them to miss out on specific experiences. For Oliver, having two parents is more desirable since it relieves the pressure of the parenting responsibilities. Michael also feels that it is essential to have both parents in one's life. With his mother gone, he yearns for the motherly love that he cannot attain from his father: *"I think it's difficult to grow up without a mother in your life. I've had my father, but it's the lack of motherly love, I think you could say, that I do miss. I think it's just that attention to detail you know"*. Ishan feels he has lost the ability to trust fully. In taking care of his mother, he has lost the sense of being carefree and happy.

Parental loss also brought about changes in daily routine. With only one parent responsible for the children, morning routines often seemed incredibly challenging. Hence, more structure had to be put in place. Harry, for example, commented, *"We had to change a few habits. I think we [now] have to leave early in the morning, which it's not terrible because we were always in a rush before"*. John also indicated that since his father passed away, his sleep patterns have changed completely. He now goes to bed much later at night.

In other stories, participants mentioned that their family's financial status was affected after a parent died. Harry noted that his father left behind a substantial amount of money, which enabled them to live decent lives. However, John, Benjamin, Bandile, and Ishan said their families experienced significant financial hardship. For instance, Ishan explained how he had to exercise caution when purchasing items at the tuckshop or while on camp. Moreover, he would often consider his mother first and buy her something instead.

Another secondary loss was the loss of innocence and childhood. In many interviews, participants spoke about how their parent's death forced them into new roles within the family. Many had to take on new responsibilities. Soon after his father passed away, Ishan realised that he needed to act more maturely. He said that his home responsibilities had to be his priority; otherwise, there would be consequences. At numerous points in his narrative, Oliver also mentioned that he felt responsible for his father's well-being. He believed he needed to care for his father. Harry was willing to take on more responsibility around the house but sometimes struggled in this role. He acknowledged,

*I've always said I like to be the man of the house now, but there have been times I've fallen short of that and struggled. But I've always wanted to. And this year especially, I've really like taken on that role properly.*

In the stories of John, Michael, Benjamin, and Bandile, there was less expectation in relation to taking on new responsibilities at home. Instead, they had to assume the role of taking care of themselves and become more independent and self-sufficient.

### **5.2.6 Finding Meaning in the Loss**

Participants shared stories about trying to find a sense of meaning in their loss. Some voiced how they believed there was a purpose behind adverse life events such as

losing their parents. Although he could not elaborate, John asserted, “[I] think everything that happens in your life is happening for a reason. So, I definitely think it happened for a reason”. For some participants, religion was a way to make sense of what happened.

Harry, for example, spoke about God having a plan for his life: “I think what I, what helps me a lot is my faith and Christianity. It helps me to know that He really, as a lot of Christians believe, that God has a plan for us all”. From his perspective, God’s purpose for his father’s life was for him to set up a family and leave them with adequate resources. Looking back, Harry believes that God inspired his father to ensure that the family was financially able to manage and to pursue their goals. However, for other participants, the meaning of the loss remains absent. Ishan, for example, has made sense of his parent’s divorce, yet the passing of his father remains a mystery: “This happened for a reason, Dad’s death, not so much. I haven’t really thought much about why him”. Michael’s religious beliefs have also carried him through the trials and tribulations of his life. He believes that God is vital in the face of difficulties and that, in a way, He has given him the ability to cope with life’s challenges: “God gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers”. For others such as Benjamin and Bandile, the meaning of their loss remains elusive.

### **5.2.7 Moving Towards the Future**

The fact that the late adolescent males in the study frequently referred to their present and future goals demonstrates their agency and goal-directedness. They were actively thinking about their future and making plans to achieve their desired outcomes, which indicates that they were not simply passive recipients of their life circumstances but were actively shaping their own lives. Additionally, the influence of their deceased parent in instilling the values of success in them further highlights their agency since they were able to internalise these values and use them as a guide for their own behaviour and

decision-making. As Michael commented, *“I remember with school work, she [my deceased mother] would just push me until I just couldn’t anymore. And I think that I’ve had to learn to push myself to the limits, which thank goodness, I have managed to do”*.

Michael wants to build on his academic success but more importantly, he wants to use his leadership skills to become a leader in the commercial industry. Similarly, Oliver expressed a vigorous drive towards academic achievement: *“There will be no, there will be no other thing except school. I think everything I’ll do will be geared towards those, this year’s marks, and next year’s marks”*. He is driven to obtain outstanding marks in order for him to become a medical professional who will be able to support his father financially. He also hopes to become a leader within his school community. Ishan shares a similar future goal. His aim is to become a doctor like his father and hence, his focus is on academic success.

Other participants are driven by sports achievements such as rugby, basketball, and soccer. Benjamin, for example, aspires to become a professional basketball player. He hopes to be part of an American team where he can live out his dream. Similarly, Bandile focuses on becoming a professional soccer player and perhaps even opening up opportunities for disabled people to participate in the sport he loves.

Participants shared how it was essential to ensure that they made their surviving parents happy and proud. They believed that their future success would result in their parent feeling proud of them. They, therefore, maintained that they needed to work extra hard at school or university to obtain good marks. Making parents proud also meant they had to be disciplined and well behaved, not rebelling against their surviving parent but supporting them. Similarly, participants were concerned about being unable to succeed or disappointing their parents. For example, John mentioned,

*When I don't make my mom happy, I feel like I failed. I definitely will think if I don't do well in the future, I failed. That's what I see it as. And making the people around me upset makes me feel like I failed as a person.*

### **5.2.8 Remembering Through Storytelling**

Some of the participants such as Oliver have no recollection of their deceased parents because they were so young when their parent died. Therefore, they have been relying on stories, photograph albums, and memories that others have shared to help them remember their parent who has died. Oliver shared how his father often spoke about his mother and showed him photographs. He enjoys going through the many photograph albums. For Oliver, his father's sharing of stories is beneficial. Benjamin also had an extensive collection of photographs and memorial pamphlets to help him remember his deceased loved ones. Although Benjamin's family sometimes talks about all those who died, he believes there are still mysterious events around his father's death that his family does not want to share with him. Harry also shared that he appreciated talking to friends in his faith community about his loss.

Conversely, John feels angry and sad due to his inability to voice what he feels at home. He said that nobody seems willing to speak about his father. He has concluded that he should remain silent about his feelings. Michael, however, had the opportunity to speak to his psychologist, which proved immensely useful in his life. Bandile, in contrast with most of the other participants, could not tell a story about his loss. He mentioned that no adult has ever spoken to him about his parents or the circumstances of their deaths.

Most participants appreciated the opportunity to engage in the interview in order to share their loss stories. When reflecting on how they experienced the interview process, most participants said it was a positive experience. They also spoke about voicing their

memories and experiences, which they do not typically do in daily life. Oliver, for example, had the following to say about his experience:

*It's just, it's a good reflection. And I think just being able to think about everything that's happened in life and getting memories of grandparents, and it's like clarifying ideas I've already had. And you're saying out loud, it's not so much as therapy but as just reminding yourself of specific events.*

During the interview, some participants realised how much their lives had changed. This helped the participants to understand how they coped with grief. Harry, for example, said that he came to know how he had improved himself in small ways. He was also able to understand the impact that his father's death had had on his personal and social life and how he had had to make changes, many of them positive. Michael also mentioned that he enjoyed the interview and felt it was thought-provoking. He said there were not many opportunities to speak about his loss, but after all this time, he could reflect on his life story.

Similarly, Bandile noted that he enjoyed talking about it. In the past, he would avoid thinking about the things from his past. He said that talking about what happened made him feel normal. He often lied about his parents because he did not want to feel hurt inside thinking about them. However, the interview and the opportunity to tell his story felt liberating to him.

### **5.3 Conclusion to Results**

This chapter provided an outline of the results concerning the seven individual participants and a description of the salient themes across all cases. First, each case was treated as a single unit to highlight and describe each participant's unique life story and salient narrative themes in detail. Thereafter, the themes across the seven cases with their variations were presented. It was evident that the loss of a parent brought significant

changes, secondary losses, and particular challenges as the participants came to terms with their grief. The first theme, The Grieving Process, elucidated the ongoing nature of grief during the developmental years. The second theme that emerged from the cases was Masculinity and Grieving. While some participants did not consider gender norms relevant after losing a loved one, others felt society still endorsed traditional masculine roles. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that despite such traditional roles, many participants observed a societal shift in gender role expectations. They believed that society is increasingly recognising the importance of breaking down gender stereotypes and moving towards more inclusive and accepting norms related to grieving. The third theme, Loss as a Transformation of Self, highlighted the personal changes that often follow loss. The fourth theme, The Role of Significant Others, featured the role of significant others, including the surviving parent, extended family, teachers, and peers. The fifth theme, Secondary Losses explored the changes that follow the death of a parent. The sixth theme, Finding Meaning in the Loss, revealed the views of participants in the meaning-making process. The seventh theme, Moving Towards the Future, emphasised the importance of agency and goal-directedness in the lives of parentally bereaved late adolescent males. In the eighth theme, Remembering through Storytelling, the value of storytelling was highlighted. These results are discussed and interpreted in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6: Discussion of Research Results

*“Stories give life to data, and data gives authority to stories”*

(Wendy Newman, 2017)

This chapter provides an interpretation of the themes presented in Chapter 5 considering existing literature. The research aim guides the discussion to explore and describe the emerging narrative identities of late adolescent males who have lost a parent between birth and 14 years of age. The research aim is informed primarily by McAdams’ narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2001, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Other theoretical models such as the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010), the Continuing Bonds Model (Klass et al., 1996; Klass & Steffen, 2017), and the Meaning Reconstruction Model (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006) also form the foundation of the current study. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and the GRSP (Levant, 2011; Pleck, 1995) are also considered when discussing the intersection of grief and masculinity. Furthermore, references to other studies are provided to highlight similarities to and differences from existing knowledge on the formation of narrative identity in the face of loss, grief, and bereavement.

### 6.1 Moving Between Loss and Restoration Stressors

In this study, most participants appeared to have come to terms with having lost a parent. However, they referred to moments when they are still overwhelmed by emotions and thoughts regarding the loss they experienced, as reflected in the narrative theme of the ‘Grieving Process Since the Loss’ (see 5.2.1). In contemporary psychology, this has come to be known as grief bursts (NIH National Cancer Institute, 2022). Consistent with the participants in this study, many bereaved persons will experience these highly intense grief bursts, time-limited periods in which they are reminded of their loved ones. Theoretically,

this finding is explained by the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement (Fiore, 2021; Stroebe & Schut, 2008, 2010). In this view, grief is a dynamic process in which mourners continue to oscillate between confronting and avoiding cues that provoke painful grief responses. Accordingly, as conceptualised in the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement, oscillation can transform a narrative from a contamination narrative to a redemptive narrative over time, as seen in the narratives of Oliver and Harry.

Despite occasional grief bursts, the participants in the current study stated that they were focused on specific goals such as academics and sports, and this helped them to stay focused on the future rather than dwell on the past. This appeared to serve as a distraction from more unsettling memories. Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement theorists would explain this by stating that individuals regulate their grief through fluctuation between disclosing/confronting the loss and avoiding the loss-orientated stressors in order to restore day-to-day functioning (Stroebe & Schut, 2013). Participants, therefore, seemed to be more action-orientated in their grief. It could be argued that action orientation is a means of coping with emotional issues by dealing with them indirectly rather than avoiding them altogether (Stroebe & Schut, 2010 Thompson, 1997). Keeping oneself occupied with various projects and goals while allowing moments to experience feelings of longing is a healthy coping strategy. Cohen and Samp (2018) claim that individuals who oscillate between feeling the loss and orientating themselves towards the future can access memories more flexibly and coherently, leading to a healthier grief trajectory. It can also be argued that, in time, this may lead to a coherent positive resolution characterised by life satisfaction and positive affect (Diener & Ryan, 2015). Furthermore, it can be deduced that participants are more likely to experience a sense of agency and redemption because they are free of

psychological constraints when they are able to move between loss orientated and restoration orientated stressors.

Of all the participants, only Benjamin and Bandile appeared to uphold positive states unremittingly in the face of their losses while minimising and avoiding negative emotions altogether. Bandile, for example, stated that he must not think about the past (as seen in 5.2.7) but instead, focus on his future goals. However, Stroebe and Schut (2004) claim that being entrenched in either loss or restoration processes may negatively affect coming to terms with one's loss. Therefore, simply focusing on the future without dealing with the loss and trauma may not be psychologically healthy (Fiore, 2021; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Furthermore, adolescents who avoid reflecting and talking about their loss often do not integrate the event into their narrative because they have not processed the loss and adjusted to it. This fragmentation makes the individual vulnerable to psychological challenges and psychopathology because their emerging narrative identity lacks narrative coherence (Chen et al., 2012; Habermas & Paha, 2001; Waters & Fivush, 2015).

Furthermore, adolescent males may struggle to find meaning in the face of parental loss. Bereaved youth need to have both space and time to talk about their loss in order to form a unified sense of self (Lundberg et al., 2018). For example, John felt frustrated by not being able to discuss his loss with his family (see 5.2.4). With few opportunities to talk about his loss, he finds it difficult to make sense of his feelings. At the same time, adolescent males need coping skills and healthy distractions to navigate intense feelings positively and to distract them from their loss (Cohen & Samp, 2018; Lundberg et al., 2018). In this study, distractions took the form of playing sports such as soccer and basketball, working hard at academics, listening to music, and gardening.

Most participants indicated that their parent's death was unexpected, and many oscillated between talking about the loss and avoiding the topic altogether. Thus, late adolescent males benefit from experiencing loss-orientated and restoration-orientated stressors, giving them time to process a sudden death (Lundberg et al., 2018). Some participants such as Harry focused on finding balance through the topics they chose to disclose to specific individuals rather than avoiding death. Harry, for example, had a close friend with whom he shared most of his feelings and experience. His faith community was also a source of support for him. Some participants did not offer depth to their story of loss and preferred to talk about other topics. For example, Benjamin, Bandile, and Ishan choose to engage with their friends in sports and not mention their loss experiences. Baddeley and Singer (2010) argue that avoiding memories or silencing them can serve as sources of stability, growth, and resistance in contrast with the changes that loss demands. For some youth who have experienced loss, avoiding talking about it may help them feel more stable, grow emotionally, and resist the changes that come with loss. However, it is important to note that this may not be the case for all youth who have experienced loss since everyone copes with grief in their own way.

Nonetheless, research suggests that emotional intensity, the intrusiveness of thoughts, and the vividness of traumatic memories related to loss may make memories highly accessible (Boals, 2010). In this way, memories can affect one's daily life even after the event (Boals, 2010). Memories of deceased parents may remain in the minds of young people, but they may feel unable to talk about it.

## **6.2 Guilt, Regret, and Emotional Distancing**

Participants in this study voiced various feelings, including sadness, fear, loneliness, and anger. However, feelings of guilt and regret seemed to be prominent. According to the current study, late adolescent males regret not being able to please their

deceased parents more when they were alive. For them, their achievement at school or on the sports field would have made their parent proud. These sentiments reflect the shared experience of regret and guilt when dealing with grief.

It can be argued that guilt results from young people's egocentricity, which is often developmentally appropriate (Wieruszowski, 2008). Some participants believed that they could have done something to prevent adversity in their family lives. For example, Michael spoke about wishing that he had been better behaved. According to the participants, they should have assisted their parents, recognised the illness, or even not have left them alone. Guilt in the bereavement context has been defined as "a remorseful emotional reaction in bereavement, with recognition of having failed to live up to one's inner standards and expectations in relation to the deceased and the death" (Li, Stroebe et al., 2014, p. 166). Some longitudinal studies have found that guilt often diminishes with time (Li et al., 2019; Li, Stroebe et al., 2014). Several researchers have also suggested that the nature of death can be linked to guilt for those left behind (Hill et al., 2019; Nader & Salloum, 2011; Thomsen et al., 2018). For example, although there is diversity in the research findings, unnatural death has been considered a risk factor for intense guilt (Hiyoshi et al., 2021). However, none of the participants in the current study experienced parental loss because of unnatural death.

Moreover, it appeared that participants were likely to blame themselves for their parent's death if they had experienced family difficulties before the parent's passing. It is common for young children to internalise and interpret adverse outcomes (i.e., parental marital discord) as if they were responsible for them (Worden, 2018). Ishan, for example, was reluctant to provide more information about his father's passing. He, however, narrated a story in which he felt responsible for the adversity in his family life, but he avoided speaking about his father's death. Research has shown that participants are

inclined to avoid topics related to their loss to prevent the risk of being blamed by others for their parent's death (e.g., by the interviewer in an interview) (Cohen & Samp, 2018).

Despite regret being an unsettling feeling, it is unlikely that regret plays any causal role in the adjustment to the loss of a loved one (Stroebe et al., 2014). However, self-blame is a significant determinant in shaping the course of the grief. Except for John and Ishan, participants rarely or never specifically blamed themselves for the death of their parents. Therefore, narratives reflecting a high degree of self-blame and guilt may suggest a more complicated grieving process.

Some participants spoke about how they emotionally detached themselves from their grief experiences. They described scenarios in which they had a sense of being distanced from themselves and their emotions. For example, John shared his experience of feeling empty inside, especially when thinking about his loss. At such times, he finds escape in his music. Although researchers have historically conceptualised emotional disassociation as problematic, it seems plausible that some distraction or transitory shift in awareness to more benign content could mitigate its emotional impact (Bonanno et al., 1995; Russ, 2020). Bandile also finds it emotionally upsetting to think about his parents. According to him, he copes by shifting his focus towards the future. Emotional distancing can, therefore, be seen within the framework of the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement as a form of orientating towards restoration.

### **6.3 Masculinity and Instrumental Grieving in Parental Loss**

The participants in the study were asked about the role of masculinity in their grieving process. When asked this question, they interpreted it in terms of how society expects men to behave in terms of expressing their emotions. The responses they gave indicated that while society still tends to promote emotional restraint in men, there is a shift towards a more accepting attitude. Researchers explain that socially constructed masculine

ideals, often informed by hegemonic masculinity, dictate that men be stoic in the face of difficult experiences (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele, 2014). Their sadness and despair are often expressed as anger (Creighton et al., 2013, 2016). John, for example, mentioned that he believes he should not talk about his feelings. However, he experiences deep anger towards his mother and blames her for his father's death.

Furthermore, according to Francis (2017), because of gender policing of grief, the social imperative to 'man up' has psychological consequences for males. Males with limited options for processing and expressing grief engage in activities to mask their feelings or make them disappear (Creighton et al., 2013, 2016). In the current study, despite complicated emotions related to their loss, there was no suggestion that participants felt frustrated in their grief process because of societal restrictions. Instead, it may be possible that finding constructive, achievement-orientated activities helped some participants to cope. Oliver, Harry, and Ishan's strong drive for achievement in school and Bandile and Benjamin's engagement in sports may have been a coping mechanism to gain a sense of control, striving for achievement amidst their complicated feelings of loss.

Inevitably, late adolescent males are subject to hegemonic masculinity ideals, discouraging emotional expression (Levant, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity asserts that a male should be seen as being in power, a man with power, and a man of power (Bennett, 2007). Consequently, society equates manhood with strength, success, capability, reliability, and control (Everitt-Penhale & Ratele, 2015; Morrell et al., 2012). However, males are also active agents in their lives and construct and reconstruct their ideas about masculinity.

As mentioned, participants in this study did not give much voice to their emotional responses to the loss. On the surface, they also seemed indifferent to traditional gender role prescriptions. Therefore, the late adolescent males in this study provided a limited

reflection on how hegemonic masculinity influenced their grief journey. Gender may play a role in this regard. There is evidence that females report more vivid memories than males and include more details about emotions, other people, and the meaning of their memories (Grysmann & Hudson, 2013). Female narratives are more emotional and elaborate, showing a greater sense of connectedness to others than the narratives of males. Indeed, the males in the current study spoke extensively about taking charge of their goals and aspirations. This may be their attempt to construct a different version of hegemonic masculinity. Bennett's (2007) research explains this finding when she asserts that male bereaved individuals deal with conflict between hegemonic expectations and their lived reality by thinking positively, talking positively, and taking positive action. In her study, she demonstrated that even while the impact of loss is admitted, males' stories tend to concentrate on, or at least end with, the restoration of control (Bennett, 2007).

Furthermore, Bennett (2007) points out that rational discourse and unemotional language can establish a masculine approach to grief and parental loss, thus reconstructing the participant's sense of masculinity. The author contends that males also assert their masculinity through their sense of responsibility towards others, which reflects the hegemonic values of reliability and capability (Bennett, 2007). This seems to have been the case in the current study; participants expressed their responsibility to their surviving parents.

Beyond gender prescriptions found in society, it may also be possible that the participants' motivational drives were not an attempt to mask feelings but rather an active way to deal with challenging emotions. Participants seem to cope with the challenges in their lives by being goal-driven and finding solutions to their difficulties. Grief theorists argue that late adolescents express an instrumental grieving style (Gamino et al., 2020). Indeed, in the current study, all the male participants, bar John, seemed to be

action-orientated and rational in their grief approach. In instrumental grieving, the focus is more on cognitive, behavioural, and problem-solving skills where the person manages emotions rather than expressing them openly (Nader & Salloum, 2011). The authors note that grieving can be done in acceptable ways based on social, cultural, personal, or religious factors (Nader & Salloum, 2011).

#### **6.4 Participants' Relationships with Significant Others**

Friends, family, and community members can significantly assist in coping with the loss of a parent through social support (Çakar, 2020). The current study found that participants' relationships with their surviving parents, peers, and teachers played a significant role in their ability to cope with their loss. Oliver, for example, emphasised his relationship with his surviving father. His father openly spoke about Oliver's mother and shared memories with him. He would also express his emotions such as sadness over his loss. Emotional availability, open communication, and feelings about the loss promote healthy adaptation to loss (Karydi, 2018). Oliver is well adjusted, and he narrates a cohesive story in which his mother's death forms part of a larger narrative. Other participants, for example, John, felt isolated because his mother refused to speak about his deceased father. As a result of the surviving parent's difficulty or unwillingness to talk appropriately about the loss, a child's high levels of grief may persist over time (Karydi, 2018). Michael also mentioned that he struggled with feelings of abandonment shortly after his mother died. He felt his father was unavailable and did not talk to him about the loss that they had experienced. Michael mentioned that the silencing around his mother's death had subsequently made him mistrustful. Benjamin also experienced significant frustration due to his caregivers withholding information from him about his deceased father. According to Ellis et al. (2013), failure to provide transparent and honest communication at appropriate times has a negative effect on adults in adulthood. As a

result, bereaved young people found themselves experiencing mistrust, relationship difficulties, self-esteem issues, loneliness, and feelings of isolation.

Oliver, Harry, and Ishan indicated they were concerned about their surviving parent in the aftermath of the loss. Oliver and Michael spoke about how they observed their parents struggling emotionally after losing their partner. Losing a spouse may also compromise the surviving parent's ability to be responsive to their child and their attachment to their bereaved child (Cipriano & Cipriano, 2019). Researchers have recognised that the negative psychological functioning of the surviving parent, who has often become the primary caregiver for the child, predisposes children to adverse outcomes after losing a parent (Cipriano & Cipriano, 2019). Moreover, numerous studies have shown that parenting effectiveness can be affected if the surviving parent struggles emotionally (Luecken & Roubinov, 2012; Nickerson et al., 2013; Werner-Lin & Biank, 2012). Often, these caregivers do not have a consistent structure and are not well organised, thus negatively affecting the children's mental health. Grieving parents may be less aware of their children's depression and other grief-related symptoms (Grenklo et al., 2013; Werner-Lin & Biank, 2012). Michael's narrative illustrated this point when he spoke about how his mental health deteriorated to the point that he often had panic attacks and became significantly depressed, initially without any intervention from his father.

When dealing with a parent who also seemed to struggle in their grief process, some participants felt they needed to minimise their feelings and take care of their parents. Participants spoke about how their parent's death forced them into new roles within the family. Adolescence is when young people begin to think about the future and how others will contribute to that future (Bohanek & Fivush, 2010; Chen, 2011). They may assume that their parents will provide security if things do not work out. When one of their parents dies and the other is left vulnerable, it may make life feel unsafe. Because of the loss of

security and protection, grief may be expressed in several ways when an adolescent withdraws into a private world, temporarily creating a sense of security. Draper and Hancock (2011) state that occasionally, adolescents may demonstrate a natural detachment from the intense emotions that they are experiencing or they may express their anger. They may also assume the role of caregiver for the surviving parent. They do this by concealing their grief to protect the parent who is also grieving. Children who shield those around them from their grief may feel they do not have the right to grieve (Draper & Hancock, 2011). The participants who assumed caregiving roles have yet to grieve their loss fully since they have not had the opportunity to do so.

Most participants voiced that they had good relationships with the surviving parent. However, John, who experienced difficulties in his relationship with his surviving mother, expressed anger towards her for not being willing to speak about his deceased father. Sharing memories of the deceased parent with their child appeared to be helpful. For example, Oliver's father often spoke about his mother as they looked through photograph albums. Ishan's mother also tried to ensure that Ishan maintained contact with his paternal side of the family. It is essential that surviving parents facilitate a connection with the deceased through rehearsing memories, supplying mementos, creating rituals, and maintaining contact with the deceased's family and friends (Cipriano & Cipriano, 2019). From a gender perspective, parents tend to elaborate, evaluate, and emphasise the interpersonal and emotional details more when reminiscing with daughters than with sons. Because of this, females develop more complex representations of past experiences and are better at recalling emotional episodes than males (Boals, 2010). While previous literature suggests that daughters may benefit more than sons from sharing detailed memories of the deceased parent, the results in this present study indicate that sharing memories can also be beneficial for males.

Participants also spoke about family members being a source of support. Oliver's aunts and grandmother took on caregiver roles when his mother passed away. Similarly, Michael's extended family showed concern over his well-being. Benjamin also had his aunt, grandmother, and great-grandmother intercede as supportive adults. Çakar (2020) states that social relationships such as family relationships benefit bereaved individuals. The benefit of having an extensive social network, including family, is that it provides people with various positive experiences and socially rewarding roles. For example, many participants recalled how they enjoyed holidays with extended family members. Ishan spoke about his pride in being the first grandson on his father's side. A bereaved individual's sense of identity, purpose, meaning, belonging, and self-esteem are thus positively affected by family support (Çakar, 2020).

Peers played a more complicated role in the participant's grief journey. Michael, Bandile, and John felt different from their peers because of their loss. Sandler et al. (2003) noted that bereaved adolescents, especially males, often feel inferior to their peers who did not experience parental loss. Despite this, researchers believe that peer support can be a stress-buffering mechanism by providing emotional support and preventing peer victimisation (Dopp & Cain, 2012). LaFreniere and Cain (2015) add that peer support is more effective when it is well-matched to the source of the support, the type of support, and the recipient. It should be noted that some participants, for example, Ishan, did not initiate support from their peers. Ishan mentioned that he does not talk about his loss unless asked by others. Bandile also said he does not want to talk about losing his parents. According to LaFreniere and Cain (2015), it appears to be rare for a bereaved young person to initiate such interactions. They found that although many of their participants (71.4%) received support from peers, the same percentage (71.4%) preferred not to discuss their bereavement situation with peers. Generally, children and adolescents who have lost a

parent do not want to interact with peers about their loss but receive support and interaction nonetheless.

### **6.5 Loss as a Disruptive Life Event**

Similar to other studies (Kayne, 2018; Mahon, 1999; Wieruszowski, 2008), this study highlighted pronounced and challenging secondary losses in the participants' lives. The death of a parent often causes significant changes and secondary losses in family relationships, roles, finances, and routines. For example, Ishan shared his story about how he has become more financially aware of expenses and how he is much more frugal with money since his father died. Harry and John spoke about how their daily routine changed after their father died. Both of their stories mentioned how they had to help with morning routines and getting ready for school.

The secondary losses were unique to each participant and only became apparent to the participants as they matured. Gonzalez-Leon (2021) states that secondary losses reveal themselves over time, and those left behind often find themselves perpetually grieving. Developmental changes may also amplify secondary losses. Oliver, for example, mentioned that now he is older, he often wonders if he would have had siblings if his mother had not died. Gonzalez-Leon (2021) states that the most significant secondary loss is often the loss of who a person was, in other words, their identity. For example, an individual may become a different person because of having to take on new responsibilities and may have a change in life direction due to the loss. Most adolescent males in the study clearly articulated these changes. They felt more responsible for helping their surviving parent.

Researchers have shown that various life changes may occur that are not directly linked to the death (Gonzalez-Leon, 2021; Mahon, 1999; Thompson et al., 1998). For example, the loss of income generated by the deceased parent may require significant

lifestyle changes such as moving in with other family members. Secondary losses associated with moving include the loss of friends together with the loss of a familiar neighbourhood, bedroom, school, and perhaps routine. Ishan's story highlights numerous losses; he had to move from his childhood home and continually worries about finances. Bandile and Benjamin's stories are especially unique considering the cascade of secondary losses they experienced. Both boys often moved to different caregivers and schools and thus found it challenging to form lasting relationships with teachers and peers. Moreover, in the study, Oliver, Harry, and Michael were compelled to assume adult roles after the trauma because of their socioeconomic status, family structure, and resources (Masten, 2014).

Often, in the face of secondary losses, young people sense a loss of control. Each secondary loss engenders its own grief reactions (Rando, 2018). As a result of the primary and secondary losses and the subsequent layers of grief, young people may experience a dramatic shift in their assumptive worldviews (Beder, 2004; Hogan et al., 2021). They may start experiencing the world as dangerous, random, and out of control and blame themselves for the adversity that they experienced. John and Bandile's life stories reflect how changes in their assumptive worldviews have complicated their grief. For them, the world feels unsafe and uncertain. Bandile, for example, said that he fears the future since he does not know what lies ahead for him beyond the safety of the care centre. In addition, when the death is sudden or violent and is followed by multiple secondary losses, identity confusion and distress may be more prominent and confounding (Captari et al., 2021). Having difficulty reconstructing a coherent sense of self post-loss has been associated with prolonged grief symptoms (Boelen et al., 2006). In the absence of any memories or stories, Bandile finds it challenging to share his life story. In some ways, his grief appears undefined because he does not know exactly who his parents were or how they died. Thus,

secondary losses can significantly affect a young person's narrative identity in the aftermath of the primary loss. It may alter their assumptive worldviews, compromising their sense of agency, competence, and relatedness (Reis et al., 2000). It is essential for these three basic needs to be met during a child's developmental years and after their parent's death. It can be argued that if these needs are negated, the late adolescent may be more predisposed to narrating a life story characterised by contamination sequences where negative experiences and events dominate their narrative and affect their sense of self. Therefore, it is crucial to provide support and meet the basic psychological needs of young people during their developmental years, and especially after the death of a parent, in order to ensure they have a stable and coherent sense of self and can cope with any secondary losses that may occur.

### **6.6 Making Meaning out of Parental Loss**

To reconstruct meaning after loss, individuals engage in three primary activities: sense-making, benefit finding, and identity construction (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2010). As part of their meaning-making process, participants in this study revealed that they were still trying to understand why their parents had died, what it meant for them, and how it fit into the larger story of their lives. All the participants in the study except Bandile knew the circumstances around their parent's death. For most participants, it was easier than for Bandile to understand why their parent had died. It can be deduced that Bandile would find it more challenging to find meaning in his loss because he has no recollection, story, or autobiographical memory to assist him in the process. Some of the late adolescent male participants in this study indicated that they possibly could find an answer to their loss in their religion. However, it appeared as if the participants had not actively engaged in this meaning-making process yet. People can psychologically interpret tragedy as something that happened as part of a divine plan, as an act of God's mercy, or as

part of God's divine plan for the greater good (Lichtenthal et al., 2011). According to John, he knew the reason for his father's death but could not understand it at this point in his life. However, Harry believed that divine intervention had led to his father making good financial decisions before he died. However, Ishan could not understand why it was his father who had to die.

Neimeyer and Thomson (2019) state that people tend to find meaning in their loss by benefit finding. By focusing on the positive changes that the loss precipitated, individuals attempt to make sense of the loss (Stein et al., 2009). Participants in this study did not articulate any benefits related to their loss. From the perspective of Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction Model (Flesner, 2004; Neimeyer, 2019; Neimeyer et al., 2014; Neimeyer & Thompson, 2019), it is unlikely that late adolescents would be able to articulate the process of finding or creating a sense of understanding regarding the loss. The findings are consistent with the participants' narratives; at this stage, they cannot find true benefits from loss and, therefore, cannot make a meaning structure that underscores the positives.

However, in some participants' narratives, there was a more precise sense of positive growth due to the loss. Their sense of self was thus positively restructured when confronted with losing a parent. This is referred to as post-traumatic growth (Michael & Cooper, 2013). Oliver and Michael, who experienced such growth, reported that they developed a changed sense of self and became more independent and confident. Similarly, John and Ishan took on new roles after their parents had died and developed a greater awareness of life's fragility. Harry experienced a change in social relationships, increasing his capacity for empathy and becoming emotionally closer to others. According to research findings, bereaved individuals often report being more compassionate, patient, tolerant,

empathic, and courageous after losing a loved one (Michael & Cooper, 2013; Şimşek Arslan et al., 2022).

Re-accessing and reconstructing the 'back story' of the relationship with the deceased often facilitates greater meaning-making (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2014). Having a continuous bond, therefore, encourages the meaning-making process. Participants appeared to be more instrumental in their grief, and it was noteworthy that very few spoke about how they have attempted to have a continued bond with their deceased parent. Continued bonds advocate keeping a relationship with the deceased in some form or another as opposed to distancing oneself from the loved one (Ziółkowska et al., 2015; Karydi, 2018; Serrine et al., 2018). In the current study, most participants did not spend time on activities and rituals to help establish and maintain a bond with the deceased parent. However, Oliver mentioned that he enjoyed reflecting and reminiscing about his mother when he looked at the photograph albums at home. Harry felt a connection with his deceased father when he played rugby. Benjamin used a small display area in his room where he kept all the funeral letters of deceased family members, including his father. On the contrary, Bandile and Ishan have no active reminders of their deceased parents. Nader and Salloum (2011) contend that instrumental grievers risk developing complicated grief reactions if they do not take constructive actions such as memorialising or volunteering to honour the deceased. For John and Bandile, there may be value in commemorating their lost parents to help them cope with their loss. However, it may be detrimental for an individual to develop a continuing bond with the deceased, especially if they had a complicated relationship with that person (Field & Filanosky, 2009). Therefore, Ishan may benefit from avoiding a continuing bond since he experienced a complex relationship with his father before his death.

The participants in this study appeared to be on a continuum of meaning-making regarding the loss of their parents. It was challenging for these adolescents to articulate what parental loss meant, and it seemed that some did not consider forming a continuing relationship with the deceased or finding benefit from the experience and reconstructing the loss experience. An event is meaningful by reflecting on its implications for future behaviour, goals, and values (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Reflecting on meaning requires abstract thinking and increases with age. Constructing meaning out of complex life events seems to increase significantly in late adolescence. Young people become deeply reflective during this developmental phase (Giebel, 2018; McLean & Pratt, 2006; McLean & Thorne, 2003). However, late adolescents are more likely to reflect superficially on the lessons learnt (McLean & Thorne, 2003). The findings of the study suggest that the late adolescents were beginning to engage in the process of meaning reconstruction, which involves creating a new sense of meaning and purpose after experiencing a loss. However, the way in which they were engaging in this process was still in its early stages and lacked depth, indicating that further support may be necessary to facilitate a more profound and integrated sense of meaning and purpose in life.

### **6.7 Coherence of a Narrative Identity**

In this study, when recalling the past event of parental loss, it was not the event itself that was central to understanding the participant's narrative identity. Instead, it was how the individuals constructed the event in narrative form (McLean et al., 2020). Thus, the degree to which the late adolescent males coherently told the story of parental loss, in turn, could suggest the degree of psychological well-being of the respective individuals. Hence, when there is greater narrative coherence in the loss narrative, it can be expected that the individual will have a more significant positive psychological adjustment to their loss and be able to draw meaning from the event (Lind et al., 2020).

Although the focus of this study was not on coding the level of narrative coherence, it is meaningful to consider the qualitative degree of coherence in the participants' narratives. For example, Michael's narrative reflects excellent detail and a cause-and-effect relationship between life events. He could articulate how events have shaped him, and the story was told coherently. Yet Michael had also experienced significant psychological distress due to his loss. Narrative coherence was only partially confirmed as a positive predictor of psychological well-being and a negative predictor of internalising symptoms in the study of Van den Poel and Hermans (2019). Therefore, individuals may reflect high narrative coherence yet still experience emotional difficulties.

Benjamin and Bandile do not have elaborate life stories. Both participants lost their parents when they were still infants. In addition, they could not provide context to their parent's passing because they were very young when their parents died, and no adult could give them information about what exactly happened to the deceased parent/s. The lack of a coherent account of identity is thought to result in a loss of meaning and purpose in life (McLean & Fournier, 2008; Vanaken et al., 2022). This may also result in a feeling of helplessness and even impair the ability to develop positive intimate relationships (Bauer, Graham et al., 2019). It is unknown how the uncertainty of parental loss in these two participants' lives will play out in their emerging life stories.

### **6.8 Telling the Story of Loss**

Although it could be assumed that sharing the story of parental loss might be challenging for late adolescent males, the findings in this study suggest that participants found the discussion beneficial and meaningful. Some participants said they had limited opportunities to discuss their loss and had enjoyed the experience. For them, it was helpful to have opportunities to discuss parental loss, despite it being a sensitive topic. Other researchers have found similar sentiments in their studies. For example, in the study of

Andriessen et al. (2022) on loss in childhood, participants found participation helpful and would recommend being involved in a similar study. This study thus supports the idea that researchers should engage young people in sensitive discussions and avoid relegating youth to a minor role in their own experience. Indeed, according to Cook (2009), youth are not solely affected by traumatic events and situations and the responses of others, the community, and the larger culture, the child or adolescent actively deals with the experience and its aftermath. Researchers, therefore, underscore the benefits of research involvement of young people because it brings new insights and expanded meanings to literature.

Beyond honouring the voices of young people, there is a further benefit in allowing them to share their life stories. Participants in this study mentioned that they had reached certain realisations about themselves in the interview. Moreover, they said that they now more fully appreciated the emotional impact that parental loss had in their lives, which was mainly absent before the discussion. This correlates with exploratory narrative processing, a process by which a person acknowledges, reflects upon, and analyses the emotional impact of challenging experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Pals, 2006). A sense of meaningful change can also be incorporated into their life stories by learning from them. Limited research has been conducted relating to exploratory narrative processing. However, Pals (2006) indicated various expressions of this phenomenon in her seminal study.

In the current study, several participants took time in telling a comprehensive narrative and reflecting upon the meaning of the loss in their lives. For example, Oliver, Harry, and Michael spoke extensively about their loss experience and how the experience has shaped their sense of self. The current study showed that these participants often had many opportunities with family members to reflect on their loss and to think about how it

affected them, supporting a robust narrative identity. Several researchers concur with this finding. For example, Fivush and Nelson (2006) state,

Parent-guided reminiscing about past events that includes discussion, comparison, and negotiation of internal states of self and other, and places these internal states in explanatory narratives of behaviour, allows children to construct a psychologically imbued representation of relations between past and present, and self and other. (p. 235)

Additionally, Baddeley and Singer (2010) state that sharing autobiographical memories is essential in maintaining and redefining one's identity after loss. A supported young person may be able to cope with bereavement more effectively and communicate their grief more efficiently when there are frequent discussions about the deceased parent (Cohen & Samp, 2018).

According to their self-reflections, through conversations and the sharing of memories, the participants in this study have become stronger, wiser, more driven, and more compassionate after the loss. Thus, from a theoretical perspective, they have engaged in transformational processing, which can be conceptualised as exploring how the negative emotional impact of a problematic experience challenges the individual (Lilgendahl et al., 2018). Furthermore, the participants portray themselves as positively transformed due to the experience. Their life stories often follow a redemptive sequence (Booker & Perlin, 2021). For example, some of the participants mentioned that they have developed a greater sense of empathy and compassion, a stronger appreciation of life, and a deeper understanding of their values and priorities.

John displayed a degree of transformational processing, vividly exploring the emotional impact of parental loss. As a result of this active exploration, some learning has been gained from the experience in addition to an openness to change. However, John

continually returned to the emotional impact of his loss. Pals (2006) contends that the narrator's ruminative return to their grief often overshadows the glimpses of transformational processing because they doubt they can ever feel the same way again. As a result, they become 'stuck' in the story. The person becomes limited in their ability to articulate a narrative identity in which they can move forward with their life. They, therefore, may narrate a contamination sequence in their narrative identity. John exhibited emotional overwhelm. Lilgendahl et al. (2013) contend that individuals who are overly emotional and overanxious are likely to explore their experience but display fewer themes of positive growth, more interpretations of how events negatively affect the self, and more explanations for adverse events that implicate the self in maladaptive ways (Lilgendahl et al., 2013).

At the same time, Lilgendahl et al. (2018) cautioned researchers by stating that exploratory processing is a process that unfolds over time and that should not be rushed. Their research supports the finding that young people, especially late adolescents, are more inclined to be exploratory in their narratives rather than focusing on finding a positive resolution (Lilgendahl et al., 2018). The various theoretical explanations, therefore, suggest that processing a traumatic event such as parental loss may take some time, especially for a developing young person.

In contrast to the previous life stories, a narrative such as Ishan's exhibits a lower level of exploratory narrative processing but reflects a positive outcome and a redemptive life story. Individuals who do not engage in exploratory processing often resolve challenging experiences such as parental loss by self-distancing rather than transforming the experience (Pals, 2006). As a result, they develop a narrative identity that is defined primarily by the continuity of happiness in their lives. In early adulthood, the tendency to

resist interpreting difficult experiences as opportunities to reconstruct identity could limit maturity.

Participants' engagement in the research facilitated a process of exploratory narrative processing to a greater or lesser degree. By sharing their story with an empathetic and attuned listener, they could scaffold their narrative, and this helped them to gain more insight and meaning. Some participants said that they left the interview with a different perspective. Researchers have explained how former experiences can be seen differently with each retelling (Boswell, 2008; Dunlop, 2022). This is especially true for extroverted individuals. It may be that through multiple retellings of their stories, talkative individuals are readily able and willing to create more narratives that are more coherent (Lodi-Smith et al., 2009). For example, Michael is an extrovert, and the elaborate and detailed nature of his narrative is a clear example of a cohesive narrative that leads to more insight and meaning-making. Michael had had the opportunity to retell and reconstruct the story of parental loss in many ways during his psychotherapy.

Numerous retellings enhance the autobiographical reasoning through which participants create connections between the past, present, and future. The story integrates personal memories into a culturally, temporally, and thematically coherent narrative (Habermas, 2007, 2019). In short, late adolescent males benefit from communicating their loss experience often and having someone empathetically acknowledge and validate them. For Bandile, non-verbal and creative arts could be used to express his life story since he found it challenging to speak about his loss; this was perhaps due to a combination of complex trauma and language difficulties. Creativity is a beneficial avenue because while some youths are verbal and feel comfortable talking to adults about grief, others are non-verbal and will internalise their grief (Thanasiu & Pizza, 2019). Nevertheless, the latter still need the opportunity to tell their story.

## 6.9 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the themes that were identified in the life stories of late adolescent males who have lost a parent. Parental loss featured prominently in the participants' narratives as a significant turning point. The current study adds to the understanding of the life stories of bereaved young people. For example, this study has shown that the secondary losses following their parent's death presented the most challenges to adolescent males. Participants often had more responsibilities in the home environment and felt they should support their surviving parents. Hence, in some way, they have lost a part of their childhood innocence. Furthermore, it was evident that even years after their parent had passed away, they were still dealing with guilt and regret. Grief is ongoing, although it fluctuates in intensity as time continues. The current study also illustrated how the late adolescent males are engaging in meaning-making related to their loss. Some found the purpose of the loss in religion, whereas others found meaning in the fact that they have changed positively because of the hardship they had to endure. Few, however, actively engaged in continuing bonds with their deceased parent. Regardless of the challenges related to their loss, many participants had a strong future focus that lends itself to a redemptive life story. Their goals were often focused on academics and sports, reflecting an instrumental grieving style. The participants also voiced their appreciation for being able to tell their stories of loss. In a society that often silences conversations around grief and bereavement, especially for males, open discussions help individuals to make sense of what happened to them. The following chapter provides the conclusion of this study and focuses on the study's limitations, strengths, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 7: Key Findings, Limitations, and Recommendations

*“I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?”*

James P Spradley

Despite increasing research on child and adolescent grief, little is known about the narrative identities of parentally bereaved late adolescent males. Thus, the intention of the current study was to understand the narrations of late adolescent males regarding their experiences of parental loss and the narrative form and meanings that were reflected in their life stories. The researcher also explored how late adolescent males experienced the bereavement process and how gender roles inform their grieving process. The research findings can add to the growing literature on narrative identity development and child and adolescent grief and bereavement. This research study is timely and vital considering the significance of narrative identity and the psychological well-being of thousands of parentally bereaved South African youths. In this chapter, a summary of the main findings of the research is presented, followed by a reflection on the study’s limitations and recommendations for future research.

### 7.1 Summary of the Most Significant Findings

The study’s unique contribution was capturing the life stories or narrative identities of parentally bereaved late adolescent males. The participants’ narratives associated with relevant grief theories and the theoretical frameworks of narrative identity were explored. Consequently, the research produced rich data collected through semi-structured interviews

called Life Story Interviews. In identifying themes, thematic narrative analysis was used. A summary of the most significant findings is outlined below.

### ***7.1.1 The Grieving Process***

There was a tendency among participants not to share their emotional experiences regarding parental loss. Rather, they seemed to be more restoration-orientated in their grief. Previous studies have found similar findings related to males and their grieving process, as conceptualised through the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement (Fiore, 2021; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The participants seemingly accepted the loss of their parent, and it appeared as if attachments with the deceased were relinquished or minimised. They focused on their new roles in the family and the new responsibilities in their lives. Their grieving process, therefore, reflected a more instrumental grieving style, as discussed by Gamino et al. (2020). Instrumental grieving was expressed physically and cognitively in their process of coming to terms with their loss. Indeed, an instrumental grieving style provided them with a stronger sense of agency and competence in their lives. They found meaning in moving forward towards personal goals that were significant to them. This aligns with previous studies that found males to be more orientated towards problem-solving in their grief (Doughty, 2009; Stroebe et al., 2001). In turn, the hope for a successful career or a future family was often evident. Besides personal fulfilment of these goals, the participants wanted to achieve success either to make their deceased parent proud or to provide financially for their surviving parent. Personal achievements and goals associated with their deceased parent often appeared to be part of their meaning-making process and provided them with a sense of agency.

Regret and guilt, a common reaction in the grieving process (Stroebe et al., 2014), was also evident in the participants' narratives. Their guilt often related to wanting to be a

well-behaved and studious performer at school to make their parents proud. Lastly, participants often found meaning in dealing with their loss through religion. Lichtenthal et al. (2011) support this finding and state that religion often serves as a means to restore a sense of understanding about oneself and the world after trauma. Some participants in this study perceived their loss as having a significant purpose or meaning in life. They also found a sense of meaning in their loss by focusing on how they have grown personally and how they have become more empathetic. As a result of being more empathetic because of their hardship, some participants in this study wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. Participants in Kayne's (2018) study expressed that positively affecting others' well-being contributed to finding purpose in their own lives.

No single narrative can be understood without considering the contextual factors influencing grief and narrative identity development. One variable, gender socialisation, may play a role (Doka & Martin, 2010). However, in the current study, participants hold mixed perspectives on how gender expectations shaped their grieving and identity. Many participants understood gender from gender stereotypes such as men having to restrain emotional expression. Interestingly, many of the participants in the study felt that society was changing in how it viewed these stereotypes. Therefore, they felt that society would be less judgmental towards men expressing emotion in the face of loss and grief. Thus, for them, their gender did not necessarily play a significant role in their grieving process.

The findings presented in this study provide a new understanding of the grieving process and its relationship to gender. Previous research has suggested that males tend to focus more on problem-solving and instrumental coping strategies in their grief, while females tend to express their emotions more openly (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). However, this study found that the male participants in the study were more restoration-orientated in their grief and tended to minimise attachments with the deceased. Furthermore, while

previous research suggests that males may be less likely to express their emotions due to societal expectations around gender (Doka & Martin, 2011), the participants in this study felt that societal attitudes were changing, and men would be less judged for expressing their emotions. These findings provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between gender and grieving, and the need to consider individual experiences and societal attitudes. This study offers a fresh perspective on gender and grieving that can help inform future research and the support for individuals experiencing loss.

### ***7.1.2 Narrating the Experience of Parental Loss***

All the participants expressed their appreciation for being granted the opportunity to share their experiences of their loss. They described the interviews as thought-provoking, insightful, and enjoyable. The Life Story Interview facilitated a process of exploratory narrative processing during the discussions, which enabled them to explore, reflect, and analyse their experience of parental loss (Alea, 2018; Atkinson, 2012). It was evident in some stories that the significant caregivers in the participants' lives did not often engage in conversation about their deceased parent. In some instances, participants were actively discouraged from reflecting on the loss. This finding is similar to the findings in the research of Szymanowska (2014) who highlighted the need for talking about the loss and sharing the pain with other family members. One can thus assume that the participants in the current study were not encouraged to develop a continuing bond with the deceased parent. However, a few participants had caregivers who actively engaged in storytelling about the deceased parent, using, for example, photographs. In this way, the young person could feel a connection with their deceased loved one. The literature explains that maintaining bonds with deceased loved ones is healthy, normal, and essential to the grieving experience (Black, 2014; Klass & Steffen, 2017; Serrine et al., 2018). Nevertheless, many of the adolescent participants had little opportunity to reminisce about

their deceased parents and little opportunity to listen to shared memories of the deceased parent's life. In turn, their autobiographical memories connected with their deceased parent are limited, especially if the loss was at a young age. In the absence of autobiographical memory, autobiographical reasoning is compromised, and hence it will be challenging for the adolescent to form a coherent narrative about their parent and their loss (Banks, 2013; McLean & Fournier, 2008). In narratives of challenging experiences such as parental loss, exploratory narrative processing predicts positive self-transformation (Pals, 2006; Weststrate & Glück, 2017). Therefore, opportunities for exploratory narrative processing (Pals, 2006) are essential to the development of coherent narrative identities of bereaved adolescents and positive psychological outcomes.

In addition, the study demonstrated that older participants, with supposedly more complex cognitive development, did not necessarily provide richer accounts of their experiences. Those who experienced complex trauma and parental loss found it challenging to narrate their story coherently. A study by Capella (2017) supports this finding, demonstrating that both over- and under-explanation in the face of trauma signal disequilibrium and loss of narrative coherence in the construction of personal identity. The current study revealed that both individual and family elements and contextual factors contributed to the narrative identity development of late adolescent male participants. To conceptualise narrative identity development in the face of parental loss, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Chachar et al., 2021) would be helpful in future research.

The findings mentioned in this section contribute to the existing literature on the experiences of bereaved adolescents by explaining the importance of opportunities for exploratory narrative processing in the development of coherent narrative identities and positive psychological outcomes. Furthermore, the study reveals that the availability of significant caregivers who engage in storytelling about the deceased parent can have a

profound impact on the ability of young people to maintain bonds with their deceased loved ones. Additionally, the study challenges the assumption that older adolescents provide richer accounts of their experiences than younger individuals do since all those who experience complex trauma and parental loss may find it challenging to narrate their stories coherently. These findings are novel and add to the existing body of research on the experiences of bereaved adolescents by highlighting the importance of exploring the role of family and contextual factors, as well as the potential benefits of opportunities for exploratory narrative processing, in the development of coherent narrative identities and positive psychological outcomes.

### ***7.1.3 The Role of Significant Others***

In this study, the role of significant others such as the surviving parent, family members, teachers, and peers was highlighted in the grieving process. Mroz et al. (2020) found that themes of communion are often more present in loss narratives than in other life-changing events. Notably, it was the relationships that participants shared with the adults in their lives that were especially meaningful for them. The role of the surviving parent was often mentioned by participants. Karydi (2018) found that the role of the surviving parent in facilitating the grieving process promoted a positive connection with the deceased in childhood. The current study determined that the death of a parent often altered the relationship that the participant had with the surviving parent. These young people frequently had to be a companion and support person for their surviving parent. For some participants, the relationship often changed in a negative way after losing their parent, and this dramatically changed their life story. The narratives in this study demonstrated that young people often struggle to cope when the surviving parent finds it difficult to cope with the loss of their spouse.

Extended family such as grandparents and aunts often entered into caregiver and supportive roles in the aftermath of the parent's death, providing support not only to the adolescent but also to the surviving parent. Their mere presence created a sense of consistency and safety for the adolescent. This finding is supported by Scott et al. (2020) who demonstrated the importance of social support in the aftermath of loss. In some instances, the participants in the current study felt a sense of connection with their deceased parent by staying in touch with that parent's side of the family, and this formed an integral part of their sense of self (Klass & Steffen, 2017).

Teachers also played a significant support role for some participants. Their empathetic and unconditional support often helped participants to voice their story of family difficulties and loss, which helped them to cope. School often became a place of safety in a world that felt chaotic. Hence, participants valued the opportunity to have a relationship with teachers in which they could experience support and agency in their own lives. It is thus not surprising that some participants included educational experiences as significant life events in their life story. Social support plays an important role in the grieving process for adolescents who are in intense relationships with their school teachers and peers, as found by Çakar (2020).

Peers appeared to play a conflicting role in many participants' narratives. In many of the stories, participants experienced betrayal, mistrust, competitiveness, and a negative influence in their peer relationships. Koblenz (2016) confirms this finding by stating that in the face of loss, young people find it increasingly difficult to maintain relationships with their peers. Moreover, some of the participants in the current study voiced their reluctance to open up to peers about their lived experience of parental loss. In one instance, peers rebuffed a participant for wanting to talk about his father's death, telling him that he was being negative. It is evident that many participants felt that they were different from their

peers after losing a parent, and they carried that feeling with them. Peers were thus not always perceived as supportive and helpful in dealing with parental loss.

The findings presented in this section provide new insights into the role of significant others in the grieving process of adolescents who have lost a parent. While previous research has acknowledged the importance of social support in the aftermath of loss, this study highlights the specific roles played by various individuals in the adolescent's life, including surviving parents, extended family, teachers, and peers. The study demonstrates that the relationship between the surviving parent and the adolescent can be altered significantly after the loss of the other parent, and the adolescent often becomes a companion and support person for the surviving parent. Moreover, the study finds that peers can be perceived as unsupportive and can even be considered a negative influence in the adolescent's life after losing a parent. These findings add new understanding to the existing literature on adolescent grief and highlight the need for targeted support interventions for young people coping with parental loss.

Mroz et al. (2020) found that themes of communion are present more in loss narratives than in other life-changing events. This study builds on this finding by highlighting the specific individuals who provide communion and support in the adolescent's life. Karydi (2018) also acknowledges the role of the surviving parent in facilitating the grieving process. However, this study goes further and demonstrates how the adolescent's relationship with the surviving parent is altered after the loss of the other parent. Additionally, while previous research has acknowledged the importance of social support in the aftermath of loss (Scott et al., 2020), this study provides a more nuanced understanding of the specific roles played by different individuals, including extended family, teachers, and peers. The conflicting role of peers in the grieving process is also a new finding that has not been extensively studied in previous research. Hence, this study

adds new insights into adolescent grief and highlights the importance of targeted support interventions that address the specific needs of young people coping with parental loss.

#### ***7.1.4 Secondary Losses and Contamination Themes***

Several participants highlighted contamination themes in their life stories. In these stories, they narrated scenes that began positively but ended negatively. Many participants' lives took a negative turn soon after their parents died. They had often been confronted with secondary losses and had had to adapt (Gonzalez-Leon, 2021; Werner-Lin et al., 2010). These losses often involved changes in finances, family relationships, and responsibilities. For example, participants had to take on new responsibilities and roles such as 'being the man of the house'. Some participants shared stories of how they have completely lost contact with certain family members after their parent died. In one participant's narrative, his mother left him and his brother to be raised by grandmothers and aunts. In many instances, the family's financial situation changed and they, therefore, had to be financially conservative. Other participants had changes in their daily routine due to the absence of their other parent, which affected, for example, their sleep schedules. Over time, it seems that some participants have adjusted to these losses and have grown because of them.

However, not all narratives reflected contamination after the passing of their parent. Instead, some participants had had to deal with parental conflict and divorce before their parents' death. These adverse historical experiences left a profound psychological scar on these participants and complicated their grief journey. They not only had to deal with the trauma of conflict in the home and family environment but also had to come to terms with the death of their parent. Often in the face of previous adversities, the parental loss compounded their trauma. In turn, it influenced their assumptive worldviews (Beder, 2004), and they experienced the world as unpredictable and hostile. Consequently, they

experienced less agency in their lives. Their narratives were also more fragmented and superficial. Thus, previous historical traumas related to their parents followed by parental loss often resulted in a contaminated narrative characterised by incoherence in their life stories. Berman et al. (2020) concurs and extends this finding by stating that identity can be a lens through which trauma is perceived and interpreted, helping to determine whether a traumatic experience results in post-traumatic stress disorder or post-traumatic growth.

The findings presented in this section contribute to our understanding of the impact of parental loss on adolescents and highlight the prevalence of contamination themes in the narratives of adolescents who have experienced parental loss. While previous research has explored the impact of parental loss on adolescents, the present study extends this research by exploring the specific ways in which adolescents experience contamination themes in the aftermath of parental loss. The study also identifies the complex ways in which previous traumas related to parental conflict and divorce can compound the impact of parental loss on adolescents. This highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of parental loss on adolescents and the importance of considering the broader context of adolescents' lives when exploring the impact of parental loss. Overall, this study provides new insights into the experiences of adolescents who have undergone parental loss and adds to our understanding of the impact of trauma on adolescent development.

#### ***7.1.5 Agency, Communion, and Psychological Well-Being***

As the study progressed, it became evident how adolescent male participants narrated their loss experiences and shaped their narrative identities. The stories that the participants were telling were the building blocks of their personality, and they profoundly affected their self-awareness, relationships, and future psychological well-being (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). Adler et al. (2016) explain that well-being is the most widely examined variable of narrative identity, contributing a unique explanation for analysis. The

current study supports the literature that found that motivational themes of agency and communion appeared to be strong predictors of psychological well-being, redemption, and adjustment (Booker & Perlin, 2021; Shiner et al., 2021). For example, some participants in the current study found a sense of agency in their academic and sports achievements. Their desire to do well in these respective fields was related to their deceased parent's interest in the field or as a financial means to support their surviving parent in the future. In other instances, participants mentioned that they felt agency in taking charge of their health, which stemmed from a concern about falling ill as had their deceased parents. However, others felt unsure about the future and consequently did not experience a sense of agency in their own lives at all. These were the participants who often experienced complex trauma histories that were characterised by contamination themes.

The themes of communion also reflected participants loving others and providing care to significant people in their lives. They experienced a strong kinship with their teachers and peers at school. These relationships and the need to extend love to others were often within the context of trying to cope in the aftermath of their parent's death. All participants reflected the need for connection in their stories. Participants with narratives characterised by themes of agency and communion seemed to be more optimistic and were more likely to have a positive psychological orientation towards their futures.

The current study highlights the strong connection between the themes of agency and communion and psychological well-being, redemption, and adjustment. While previous studies have examined the relationship between narrative identity and well-being, this study adds to the understanding of the specific themes that contribute to it. Additionally, the study clarifies the diverse ways in which adolescents find agency and communion in their lives, which include achieving academically and sports wise and caring for others. These findings are supported by existing literature such as the works of

Boyd et al. (2020) and Adler et al. (2016) on the importance of agency and communion in narrative identity.

## **7.2 Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

It was important for the researcher to engage carefully in the research and to present a high-quality and valid study. However, several limitations and strengths should be kept in mind. In all research studies, strengths and limitations are primarily determined by how the research design and methodology are applied (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Connelly, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data collection method and the data analysis and interpretation were strengths and limitations of this study. As a result of the flexibility of narrative inquiry (Foxall et al., 2021; Haydon et al., 2018), it was adapted to each unique participant's interaction, providing in-depth insight into their life experiences. Additionally, a detailed account of the participants' losses through the study's design and methodology were explored. The design and methodology further facilitated the investigation of a concept as intricate as narrative identity development and parental loss within adolescent participants. Thus, the methodology resulted in the achievement of the research aim and purpose.

The focus was deliberately on in-depth data and hence the small sample size of seven participants, although this limited the generalisability of the findings. Thus, the data quality was more important than the quantity and followed the narrative inquiry process (Mertova & Webster, 2019). However, it should be borne in mind that this study aimed to explore and understand rather than to generalise, predict, and explain the narrative identities of parentally bereaved late adolescent males.

Despite applying inclusion criteria, the researcher had little control over the participants' experience with the research phenomenon. For example, those participants who experienced ambiguous parental loss had a qualitatively different narrative from those

who experienced other forms of loss. Furthermore, individuals who experienced a greater level of self-reflection may have presented more themes. As a result, the current findings do not represent the experiences of all bereaved adolescent males but rather relate to unique and individual experiences.

Moreover, this study involved mental health professionals identifying participants who only met with the primary researcher after agreeing to participate. Participants might have been more willing to participate in the research process if rapport had been built before the first interview (Miller, 2017). In this way, anxiety regarding data collection could also have been reduced (Butler et al., 2019).

The Life Story Interview helped to establish rapport (Alea, 2018). However, in some instances, the interviews conducted in a semi-structured manner took a significant amount of time. In addition, some questions were broad and did not specifically require deeper reflection on the participants' experiences of loss. This resulted in some data that were irrelevant to the study.

Despite the inclusion criteria requiring language proficiency in English, several participants could not express themselves in this language. The depth and quality of their responses may have been affected by this. Additionally, the language challenges caused several difficulties during transcription. A high-quality recorder was used to record interviews, and transcriptions were checked and re-checked after a period to minimise transcription errors.

Furthermore, the researcher's values, beliefs, and viewpoints shaped the interpretation of the participants' discussions (Holmes, 2020; Fenge et al., 2019). The researcher developed his reflections by reading the literature, interacting with participants, and listening to the discussions. He acknowledges that his theoretical lenses may have informed the findings obtained during the interactions with the participants and the data

collection. Moreover, the researcher's positionality must be taken into account.

Positionality affects the process and the outcomes of the research and is included in the final reports and decisions (Holmes, 2020). Accordingly, research results are not absolute truths but are formed by the participants' stories, the researcher's viewpoints, beliefs, and experiences and the literature that was reviewed. Although the study provides a detailed description, it is also limited by the fact that it is only one of many possible co-constructions.

Considering the overarching theory of McAdams' narrative identity (McAdams, 2001, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013) in this research study, the researcher was more aware of themes relating to this theory, for example, narrative themes. Consequently, other truths and perspectives might have been missed. Furthermore, McAdams' theory is Eurocentric and may not always apply to the worldviews from the perspective of South African participants. For example, focusing on redemption as a preferred narrative may not apply in all cultural contexts (McAdams, 2005).

Additionally, narrative inquiry relies heavily on the subject's memory (Fivush, 2011; Fivush & Haden, 2003). As a result, participants may have omitted some information. The missing information could possibly have been obtained by asking the question differently or asking the question again at a later time (triangulation) (Fusch et al., 2018). However, deeper triangulation could not be used because the study was time-bound.

Despite these limitations, the themes identified within and across cases emphasise the significance of this study. By gathering data about narrative identity development in the face of parental loss, the meaning-making process of male adolescents can be better understood. The current study also expands our understanding of the phenomenon of parental loss by providing a nuanced perspective on the experiences of late adolescent males. Previous research focuses mainly on the experiences of younger children or older

adults and, therefore, this study provides a unique contribution to the literature. The findings reveal that the loss of a parent during late adolescence is a critical juncture in the participants' lives that can have lasting impacts on their development and well-being.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of taking a life-story approach to understand the experiences of bereaved young people fully. By using the Life Story Interview method, the participants were able to reflect on their experiences and share their stories in their own words. The themes that emerged from the participants' narratives provided insight into the complexity of their experiences and highlighted the need for support that addresses the emotional, social, and practical challenges faced by bereaved young people.

The study expands our understanding of the phenomenon of parental loss and emphasises the need for support and intervention programmes that address the unique needs of bereaved young people. Although the researcher noted several limitations, he believes that the findings outweigh them.

### **7.3 Recommendations for Future Research**

In addition to addressing the limitations in the current study, the following recommendations suggest ways to improve future research. To overcome the limitations of the present study regarding a more gender- and age-diverse sample, future researchers could consider an extended sample that includes adolescent girls and male and female adults to ensure sufficient gender and age representation. An extended selection would allow researchers to depict narrative identity development across the lifespan.

The use of research designs and methodologies that facilitate the study and the exploration of lifespan development may be beneficial. The use of longitudinal research together with cross-sectional research may also be considered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition, researchers could use a variety of data collection and analysis approaches to

explore the impact of parental loss on diverse adolescents. Additionally, there may be aspects in quantitative studies that were overlooked or not considered in this study. Results from these studies may be generalisable because of their large sample sizes (Duncan, 2020; Haydon et al., 2018).

The concern that life story accounts are retrospective and may not truthfully reflect lived experiences could be addressed by conducting longitudinal studies. A longitudinal research approach could also provide deeper insight into narrative identity development. Moreover, researchers could study how other adverse life experiences shape adolescents' narrative forms.

The present study was focused on the life stories of individuals who were separated from a parent during childhood through a death. Inferring how narrative identities of individuals may change if the individuals are separated from a parent through means other than death is challenging from the study's results. In the same development period, observing the differences between those separated from a parent because of divorce and those separated from a parent because of a death might be helpful. By having access to this type of data, researchers might be able to determine if narrative identity has some bearing on the nature of a parent's absence rather than the absence itself.

Moreover, future research could examine the differences in life stories among individuals who lost their parents at different ages. In this study, birth to 14 years old was used to capture a period of childhood when children rely heavily on their parents for their developmental needs (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004). If comparisons are made between the life stories of individuals who lost their parents at different stages of their development, it may be possible to determine if the age at which the loss occurs affects the themes that are commonly observed. Moreover, other age ranges could be studied to demonstrate how cognitive development at the time of loss may affect narrative identity formation.

The present study proposes several avenues for future research in the field of psychological practice. Specifically, therapy may facilitate psychological well-being through aiding clients at different developmental stages in their efforts to process their losses and establish their narrative identities. To achieve this, future investigations may explore various psychotherapy interventions that are tailored to intuitive and instrumental grieving styles, especially among adolescent males. Additionally, further research could be conducted on the optimal use of continuing bonds in therapy with diverse age groups.

Moreover, there is a need for research that focuses on the experiences of late adolescent males who have lost a parent, particularly in terms of guilt, regret, and emotional distancing. Researchers could explore the effectiveness of various interventions that are tailored to address these experiences and facilitate coping in this population. Such interventions could include cognitive-behavioural therapy, group therapy, or other approaches that have been shown to be effective in the context of loss. Ultimately, by gaining a better understanding of the needs and experiences of adolescent males dealing with loss, therapists can better tailor their interventions to promote optimal psychological well-being.

It was evident in the study that caregivers such as the surviving parent and teachers play an essential role in the development of bereaved youth. The current data could have been strengthened and the richness of the data increased if these influential individuals had also participated. Such significant others might provide different insights into the participants' lives based on their opinions and perspectives. In turn, educators, religious leaders, parents, educators, and other professionals might benefit from the findings of such a study within the field of loss and grief. Similar understandings may also help adolescents cope with loss and develop their identities.

Culture and context also inform how individuals narrate their story and how they approach the grieving process (Thanasiu & Pizza, 2019). Further research would ensure a deeper understanding of how culture shapes the form and content of an individual's narrative identity. This is especially important in a multi-cultural society such as South Africa.

#### **7.4 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter represents the study's conclusion and provides an overview of the most significant findings, limitations, and recommendations for future research. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the emerging narrative identities of late adolescent males who have lost a parent between birth and 14 years of age. More specifically, the study aimed to understand the content of the narratives about parental loss of these adolescent males and to determine how they experience the dual process of coping with grief and bereavement. Moreover, the study aimed to gain a better understanding of how life stories are constructed and the meanings that they express. The study also explored how participants' narrative identities were shaped by masculine ideology following the loss of a parent.

Insights gained from these findings contribute to the literature on the formation of adolescent narrative identity that focuses on the experience of parental loss, grief, and bereavement. There is a uniqueness to the documented results based on the context in which they were generated.

Despite the limitations associated with the research design and methodology of this study, the same variables also contributed to its strengths. The findings of this study have highlighted various avenues of research that may enhance researchers' understanding of narrative identity and contribute to developing programmes and interventions that can facilitate the adjustment of youth in the face of loss.

Elements of these findings are consistent with ideas expressed in prominent psychological theories, including the Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief and Bereavement and the narrative identity theory. The study's findings indicated that the life-altering experience of parental loss is prominent during adolescent identity development and contributes to the participant's experiences and the evolving life story. In many ways, the loss and the relationship with the deceased parent are ever-present, although they may be understood and experienced differently as time passes. In concluding this study, the words of the beloved Harry Potter character, Luna Lovegood, is fitting when she says, "Things we lose have a way of coming back to us in the end, if not always in the way we expect".

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**Approval number: UFS-HSD2020/0563/0209**

#### **WHO ARE INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?**

This study aims to recruit participants who meet the following inclusion criteria: Prescriptions for age (Late adolescence, i.e. 15 to 19-year-old), gender (self-identified males), currently in psychotherapy (well-functioning), experience (loss of a parent during their development from birth to present). In this study, I invite potential participants to think about how the loss has shaped who they are today. I am also interested in learning about how they think it is like for boys and young men, to grief the loss of a parent. As a psychologist, I invite you to consider which of your current client caseload, may meet the criteria set out above. Only participants who are relatively well-functioning will be considered. Four to five participants will be selected for this study. You are invited to select no more than one of your current clients. Suitable participants and their parent(s)/legal guardian(s) may be approached to participate in this study by means of this information sheet, and by contacting Fred Schouwink at 073 837 0175 or fschouwink@saheti.co.za

#### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

Please know that all participants are free to decide for themselves whether they wish to take part in this study. Participants will partake in a one-on-one interview with myself. The study will be audio recorded and then transcribed. I am interested in hearing their story, including parts of the past as they remember them and the future as they imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to them. Instead, I will ask participants to focus on a few key things in their lives, including the loss of their parent. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. It is anticipated that the interview will take about two hours in total. A participant may choose to not to answer any questions they do not want to. Skipping any questions will not affect their participation in the study. It may be challenging to speak about the loss, but many people find it quite beneficial to do so. Should participants feel uncomfortable at any point, they must tell me, their parent and/or yourself as his treating psychologist. Should you have any concerns before the interview take place, please notify me immediately.

#### **CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. If your client does not wish to take part, they can simply indicate as such. There are no penalties or punishments for anyone who does not wish to take part, neither are there rewards for anyone who do wish to take part. If participants do decide to take part, they will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. Should they indicate that they want to take part in the interview, and subsequently decide not to, they may choose to withdraw at any stage.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study, but the information gathered may help researchers and psychologists better understand how adolescent males can be better supported by in making sense of parental loss.

#### **WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

The interview should take approximately two hours to complete. These interviews can be conducted either at the researcher's consultation rooms in Bedfordview, Johannesburg or online via Zoom or another online platform. These recordings will only be heard by myself, and my supervisor. If at any time during the study the participant feels that they need to talk to someone about something that is concerning them, you as his current psychologist and/or parent(s)/legal guardian(s) will be contacted. The statements on the survey may at times be personal in nature, and hence, should they need to discuss anything that they may be concerned about, their parent(s)/legal guardian(s) and/or you will be notified.

#### **WILL WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Confidentiality is of high importance in this study. This means that participants' names as well as any information that could possibly lead to their identification, are completely separate from the information they provide in the interview session. All information will be handled by myself. My supervisor will be the only third party who will have access to the answers given by participants, but not their personal information. The study may be published as part of a journal, article or research report, but at no time will any identifying particulars be used in any of these materials. If, during the course of this study, participants reveal evidence of past or present child abuse, reveal evidence of abuse to elders or dependent adults, or reveal an intention to cause immediate harm to himself or to someone else, the researcher will be required by law to report this to the appropriate authorities. All information not subject to these limitations will remain completely confidential.

#### **HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?**

Hard copies of participants' answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet in the researcher's office of Johannesburg for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. All collected information from both hardcopy notes and the electronic device used in the interview will be completely destroyed (shredded and erased) after the five year period.

#### **WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

There will be no direct incentive or reward for taking part in the study. There are also no financial costs for the participants involved.

#### **HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?**

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Fred Schouwink on 073 837 0175 or email at [fredschouwink@hotmail.com](mailto:fredsouwink@hotmail.com). The results are accessible for twelve months after the study has been concluded. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Fred Schouwink on the contact details

### AGREEMENT TO NOMINATE PARTICIPANTS IN THIS STUDY

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (psychologist name and surname), treating psychologist of \_\_\_\_\_ (client's name) confirm that Fred Schouwink has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation in the research study.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as described in the information sheet. I have identified potential participants for this study from my active client base and who are in treatment with myself. I have identified a potential participant and informed him and his parent(s) /legal guardian(s) of the study via the information sheet. Furthermore, I notified the potential participant to contact Fred Schouwink on 073 837 0175 or fredschouwink@hotmail.com, should he wish to participate in this study.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions about my client's potential participation in the study. I understand that my client's participation is voluntary, and he is free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

- o I have received a signed copy of the agreement to nominate a potential participant

Full Name of Psychologist: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Psychologist: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email of Psychologist: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B: Research Study Flyer**

# WANT TO TELL YOUR STORY?

Identity, Masculinity & Parental Loss



## WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

This study interviews young men, like yourself, about the experience of growing up having lost a parent, and how it shaped who you have become today. It also looks at how society's ideas about masculinity might have helped or hindered you, on your journey.



## WHO ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

Young men, aged 15 to 19, who speak English and who have experienced the loss of a parent before the age of 10, may be eligible to participate in the study. The loss of the parent, however, should not be within the last year.



## WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

You will be invited to the researcher's office for an interview that will take approximately 1 - 2 hours. During this interview, you will be asked to think about your life story - your highs, lows and all the in-betweens!



## CAN I WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME?

Absolutely yes! Should you feel uncertain or uncomfortable with participating before or during the interview, and would like to withdraw, you can do so. No questions asked!



## IS ALL THIS CONFIDENTIAL?

Off course! Everything you will share will be confidential and will not be made available to any other person. There are a few rare exceptions, and these will be discussed should you be keen to participate.

BY PARTICIPATING, YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

CONTACT THE RESEARCHER - FRED SCHOUWINK

FREDSCHOUWINK@HOTMAIL.COM

073 837 0175

**Appendix C: Research Study Promotional Video**



## Appendix D: Informed Consent to Distribute Contact Details



### CONSENT TO DISTRIBUTE CONTACT DETAILS

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (parent/legal guardian of prospective participant), hereby give \_\_\_\_\_ (psychologist of prospective participant) with registration number, \_\_\_\_\_, permission to distribute my contact details to the primary investigator, Fred Schouwink.

I understand that Fred Schouwink will contact me to provide me with further details of the intended study, as well as to obtain my written consent for \_\_\_\_\_ (prospective participant), to participate in the study.

Full Name of Parent/Legal Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email of Parent/Legal Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

My preferred way of communication is:

- Telephonically
- E-mail
- No particular preference

**The primary investigator, Fred Schouwink, can be contacted at 073 837 0175 or via e-mail at [fredschouwink@hotmail.com](mailto:fredsouwink@hotmail.com). Should you have concerns about how the research has been conducted, you may contact Prof Luzelle Naude at [naudel@ufs.ac.za](mailto:naudel@ufs.ac.za)**





**Approval number: UFS-HSD2020/0563/0209**

#### **WHY IS YOUR CHILD INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?**

Your child has been invited to take part in this study because as an adolescent male, he is in the process of forming his identity and making sense of his life thus far. He also has the first-hand experience of what it is like to have lost a parent. In this study, I invite participants to think about how the loss has shaped who they are today. I am also interested in learning about how they think it is like for boys and young men, to grieve the loss of a parent. After having discussed my research with a participant's psychologist, I have asked them to consider potentially suitable participants. It is their opinion that, in light of the criteria, he might be an appropriate participant for this research study. The criteria for participation will consist of prescriptions for language (English speaking), age (Late adolescence, i.e. 15 to 19-year-old), gender (self-identified males), currently in psychotherapy, experience (loss of a parent before the age five of 10 years of age) and time (parental loss not less than one year ago). Four to five participants will be selected for this study.

#### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

Please know that all participants are free to decide for themselves whether they wish to take part in this study. Participants will partake in a one-on-one interview with myself, Fred Schouwink. The interview can be scheduled during any day/time that is suitable to the participant (including weekends, public holidays and school holidays). Due to the potential economic risk (travel expenses to the researcher's office) and/or loss of work/study time, a participant's parent(s)/legal guardian(s) will be provided with a R200 e-wallet to compensate for travel expenses to the primary investigator's rooms and/or for loss of work time. However, where possible, electronic video communication platforms will be encouraged and recommended. The study will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. I am interested in hearing participants' stories, including parts of the past as they remember them and the future as they imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to them. Instead, I will ask participants to focus on a few key things in their lives, including the loss of their parent. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. A participant may choose to not answer any particular question(s). Skipping any questions will not affect their participation in the study. It is anticipated that the interview will take about two hours in total. It may be challenging to speak about the loss, but many people find it quite beneficial to do so. Should participants feel uncomfortable at any point, they must tell me and/or their psychologist.

#### **CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. If participants do not wish to take part, they can simply indicate as such. There are no penalties or punishments for anyone who does not wish to take part, neither are there rewards for anyone who do wish to take part. If your child does decide to take part, they will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written assent form. Should they indicate that they want to take part in the interview, and subsequently decide not to, they may choose to withdraw at any stage.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study, but the information gathered may help researchers and psychologists better understand how adolescent males can be better supported by in making sense of parental loss.

#### **WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

The interviews should take approximately two hours to complete. These interviews can be conducted either at the researcher's consultation rooms in Bedfordview, Johannesburg or online via Zoom or another online platform. To compensate for any travel expenses to the primary investigator's rooms and/or for loss of work time, a R200 e-wallet voucher will be made available to a participant's parent(s)/legal guardian(s). The interview recording will only be heard by myself, and my supervisor. If at any time during the study a participant feel that they need to talk to someone about something that is concerning them, their current psychologist and/or parent(s) will be contacted with their written assent. The questions in the interview may, at times, be personal in nature. Hence, should they need to discuss anything that they may be concerned about, their psychologist and/or parent(s) will be notified. In the rare instance where a participant may feel distressed after the interview, a consultation with their current treating psychologist will be recommended. The fee that may be incurred for this session, will be covered by the researcher (in line with recommended tariffs for psychotherapy sessions as stipulated by Healthman).

#### **WILL WHAT MY CHILD SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Confidentiality is of high importance in this study. This means that a participant's name, as well as any information that could possibly lead to their identification, is entirely separate from the information they provide in the interview session. All information will be handled by myself. My supervisor will be the only third party who will have access to the answers given by participants, but not their personal information. The study may be published as part of a journal, article or research report, but at no time will any identifying particulars be used in any of these materials. If, during the course of this study, participants reveal evidence of past or present child abuse, reveal evidence of abuse to elders or dependent adults, or reveal an intention to cause immediate harm to himself or to someone else, the researcher will be required by law to report this to the appropriate authorities. All information not subject to these limitations will remain completely confidential.

#### **HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?**

Hard copies of participants answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet in the researcher's office of Johannesburg for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. All collected information from both hardcopy notes and the electronic device used in the interview will be completely destroyed (shredded and erased) after the five-year period.

#### **WILL MY CHILD RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

**PARENTAL CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (parent name and surname), legal parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name) confirm that the person asking my consent for my child to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the research study information leaflet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and grant permission for my child to participate in the study. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that my child is free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

- I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interview between my child and the researcher
- I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement
- I hereby give consent for my contact details to be distributed to Fred Schouwink

Full Name of Parent/Legal Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email of Parent/Legal Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



Approval number: UFS-HSD2020/0563/0209

#### WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You have been invited to take part in this study because as an adolescent male, you are in the process of forming your identity. You also have the first-hand experience of what it is like to have lost a parent. In this study, I invite you to think about how the loss has shaped who you are today. I am also interested in learning about how you feel it is like for boys and young men, to grieve the loss of a parent. After having discussed my research with your psychologist, I have asked them to consider potentially suitable participants. It is their opinion that you might be an appropriate participant for this type of research, and thus you have received this invitation. To participate in this study, you need to be able to communicate fluently in English, be between the ages of 15 and 19 years old and identify as male. Participants also need to currently be in psychotherapy. Furthermore, participants who lost a parent between the ages of five and 10 years of age, will be considered. The loss of your parent also should not be less than a year ago. Four to five participants will be selected for this study.

#### WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Please know that you are free to decide for yourself whether you wish to take part in this study. As a participant, you will participate in a one-on-one interview with myself. You can schedule the interview during any time/day that is suitable for you (including weekends, public holidays and school holidays). The study will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. In the interview, you will be asked about the story of your life. I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life, including the loss of your parent. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. You may choose not to answer any questions you do not want to. Skipping any questions will not affect your participation in the study. It is anticipated that the interview will take about two hours in total. It may be challenging to speak about the loss, but many people find it quite beneficial to do so. Should you feel uncomfortable at any point, you must tell me and/or your psychologist.

#### CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participating in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you can simply indicate as such. There are no penalties or punishments for anyone who does not want to take part, neither are there rewards for anyone who do wish to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. Should you indicate that you wish to take part in the interview, and subsequently decide not to, you may choose to withdraw at any stage.

#### WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study, but the information gathered may help researchers and psychologists better understand how adolescent males can be better supported by making sense of parental loss.

#### WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The interview should take approximately two hours to complete. These interviews can be conducted either at the researcher's consultation rooms in Bedfordview, Johannesburg or online via Zoom or another online platform. These recordings will only be heard by myself, and my supervisor. Due to the potential economic risk (travel expenses to the researcher's office) and/or loss of work/study time, all participant's parent(s)/legal guardian(s) will be provided with a R200 e-wallet to compensate for travel expenses to the researcher's rooms and/or for loss of work time. However, where possible, electronic video communication platforms will be encouraged and recommended. If at any time during the study, you feel that you need to talk to someone about something that is concerning you, your current psychologist will be contacted. In such a case, the researcher will cover the cost for one psychotherapy session with your current psychologist. Note that the questions may, at times, be personal in nature. Hence, should you need to discuss anything that you may be concerned about, your psychologist will be notified with your permission.

#### WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Confidentiality is of high importance in this study. This means that your name, as well as any information that could lead to your identification, is entirely separate from the information you provide in the interview session. All information will be handled by myself. My supervisor will be the only third party who will have access to the answers given by you, but not your personal information. The study may be published as part of a journal, article or research report, but at no time will any identifying particulars be used in any of these materials. If, during the course of this study, you reveal evidence of past or present child abuse, reveal evidence of abuse to elders or dependent adults, or reveal an intention to cause immediate harm to yourself or to someone else, the researcher will be required by law to report this to the appropriate authorities. All information not subject to these limitations will remain completely confidential.

#### HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

Hard copies of your interview transcripts will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet in the researcher's office of Johannesburg for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. All collected information from both hardcopy notes and the electronic data used in the interview will be destroyed entirely (shredded and erased) after the five years.

#### WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no direct incentive or reward for taking part in the study. However, due to potential travel expenses and/or loss of time from work/studying, a R200 e-wallet voucher will be provided to a participants' parent/legal guardian to compensate for any losses in this regard.

#### HOW WILL THE PARTICIPANT BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY?



If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Fred Schouwink on 073 837 0175 or email at [fredschouwink@hotmail.com](mailto:fredschouwink@hotmail.com). The results are accessible for twelve months. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Fred Schouwink on the contact details provided. Should you have concerns about how the research has been conducted, you may contact Prof Luzelle Naude at [naudel@ufs.ac.za](mailto:naudel@ufs.ac.za).

**Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.**



**PARTICIPANT ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my permission to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the research study information leaflet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable). I am aware that the findings of this study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings.

- I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interview.
- I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.
- I hereby give consent for my contact details to be distributed to Fred Schouwink

Full Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

<p><b>Narrative Identities of Late Adolescent Males Who Experienced Parental Loss in Childhood</b></p>
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### DEMOGRAPHICS

Please respond to the following questions:

Your age	
Your home language	
Your current grade (if applicable)	
Your highest level of education	<input type="radio"/> No High School <input type="radio"/> Some High School <input type="radio"/> Completed High School <input type="radio"/> Some university/college
How many members are currently in your household?	
What are the highest levels of education of the adults in your household?	
What are the occupational statuses of these adults?	
What would you say the economic level of your family is compared to your peers?	

## **PART 1: LIFE STORY**

### **Introduction**

This is an interview about the story of your life. I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life, including the loss of your parent. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in about two hours or less.

Please know that my purpose in doing this interview is not to figure out what is wrong with you or to do some kind of deep analysis. Nor should you think of this interview as a “therapy session” of some kind. The interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story. As a researcher, I collect people’s life stories in order to understand the different ways in which people in our society and in others live their lives and the different ways in which they understand who they are. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Do you have any questions?

### **1. LIFE CHAPTERS**

Please begin by thinking about your life as if it were a book or novel. Imagine that the book has a table of contents containing the titles of the main chapters in the story. To begin here, please describe very briefly what the main chapters in the book might be. I invite you to also include the loss of your parents as one of the chapters. Please give each chapter a title, tell me just a little bit about what each chapter is about, and say a word or two about how we get from one chapter to the next. As a storyteller here, what you want to do is to give me an overall plot summary of your story, going chapter by chapter. You may have as many chapters as you want, but I would suggest having between about two and seven of them. We will want to spend no more than about 20 minutes on this first section of the interview, so please keep your descriptions of the chapters relatively brief.

[Note to interviewer: The interviewer should feel free to ask questions of clarification

and elaboration throughout the interview, but especially in this first part. This first section of the interview should run between 15 and 30 minutes.]

## 2. KEY SCENCES IN THE LIFE STORY

Now that you have described the overall plot outline for your life, I would like you to focus in on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. A key scene would be an event or specific incident that took place at a particular time and place. Consider a key scene to be a moment in your life story that stands out for a particular reason – perhaps because it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the eight key events we will consider, I ask that you describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. In addition, I ask that you tell me why you think this particular scene is important or significant in your life. What does the scene say about you as a person? Please be specific.

### a. **High Point**

Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your life that stands out as an especially positive experience. This might be the high point scene of your entire life, or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story. Please describe this high point scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good and what the scene may say about who you are as a person.

### b. **Low Point**

The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not the low point in your life story. Even though this event is unpleasant, I would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. What happened in the event, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking

and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so bad and what the scene may say about you or your life.

[Interviewer note: If the participant balks at doing this, tell him or her that the event does not really have to be *the* lowest point in the story but merely a very bad experience of some kind.]

**c. Turning Point**

In looking back over your life, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points -- episodes that marked an important change in you or your life story. Please identify a particular episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point in your life. If you cannot identify a key turning point that stands out clearly, please describe some event in your life wherein you went through an important change of some kind. Again, for this event please describe what happened, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Also, please say a word or two about what you think this event says about you as a person or about your life.

**d. Remember Your Parent's Passing**

This is a memory of when your parent passed away. How would you describe the circumstances of your parent's passing? Which feelings did you initially experience? As you reflect on the loss, which feelings do you experience now? How easy / difficult is it for you to express these feelings? In which ways do you think that society helps / hinders boys and young men to grieve? What has been the most difficult part of the grieving process for you personally?

What things changed in your life as a result of your parent's passing (family, friendships, demographic, roles, economic?). How did you feel about these changes? What has helped you to deal with your loss?

How do you understand or make sense of your parent's death? Looking back, how has your parent's passing shaped and influenced your life?

Has your perception of yourself changed since the loss, across time? Can you please tell me if and how the death of your loved one fits with your prior views of the world? (e.g., religious beliefs).

How did your views of the world/yourself/people in the world change after the death of your loved one?

How did your close family and friends react to your parent's death? Have others' reactions corresponded to or conflicted with your own?

e. **Positive Childhood Memory**

The scene is an early memory – from childhood or your teen-aged years – that stands out as especially *positive* in some way. This would be a very positive, happy memory from your early years. Please describe this good memory in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or about your life?

f. **Vivid Adolescent Memory**

Moving ahead to your adolescent years, please identify one scene that you have not already described in this section (in other words, do not repeat your high point, low point, or turning point scene) that stands out as especially vivid or meaningful. This would be an especially memorable, vivid, or important scene, positive or negative, from your adolescent years. Please describe this scene in detail, tell what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Also, what does this memory say about you or your life?

g. **Wisdom Event**

Please describe an event in your life in which you displayed wisdom. The episode might be one in which you acted or interacted in an especially wise way or provided wise counsel or advice, made a wise decision, or otherwise behaved in a particularly wise manner. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you and your life?

**3. FUTURE SCRIPT**

a. **The Next Chapter**

Your life story includes key chapters and scenes from your past, as you have described them, and it also includes how you see or imagine your future. Please describe what you see to be the next chapter in your life. What is going to come next in your life story?

b. **Dreams, Hopes, and Plans for the Future**

Please describe your plans, dreams, or hopes for the future. What do you hope to accomplish in the future in your life story?

c. **Life Project**

Do you have a project in life? A life project is something that you have been working on and plan to work on in the future chapters of your life story. The project might involve your family or your work life, or it might be a hobby, avocation, or pastime. Please describe any project that you are currently working on or plan to work on in the future. Tell me what the project is, how you got involved in the project or will get involved in the project, how

the project might develop, and why you think this project is important for you and/or for other people.

#### **4. CHALLENGES**

This next section considers the various challenges, struggles, and problems you have encountered in your life. I will begin with a general challenge, and then I will focus in on three particular areas or issues where many people experience challenges, problems, or crises.

##### **a. Life Challenge**

Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own life story?

##### **b. Failure, Regret**

Everybody experiences failure and regrets in life, even for the happiest and luckiest lives. Looking back over your entire life, please identify and describe the greatest failure or regret you have experienced. The failure or regret can occur in any area of your life – work, family, friendships, or any other area. Please describe the failure or regret and the way in which the failure or regret came to be. How have you coped with this failure or regret? What effect has this failure or regret had on you and your life story?

#### **5. LIFE THEME**

Looking back over your entire life story with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern

a central or main theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story? Please explain.

## **6. REFLECTION**

Has your understanding of the loss of your parent changed in any way during the course of this interview? Are there any new insights or understandings you might have gained during our talk and would like to share with me?

## **Appendix H: Example of the Researcher's Reflective Journal**

### **Extract from Dairy (3 May 2022)**

Today I went to [name omitted] children's home to meet Bandile, one of the participants in this study. When I arrived at the centre, the head psychologist took me to the room where I was to conduct the interview. At first, I was concerned about the noise levels opposite the road as the children were playing on the playground. I ended up closing the windows for better sound quality. After waiting for a while, the head psychologist told me that Bandile was running late as he had to change after sports practice. After waiting a few more minutes, he was eventually escorted to the interview room with the head psychologist. I almost immediately sensed that he was nervous and shy. We sat down, and I tried to make him feel as comfortable as possible by keeping the conversation informal. I eventually proceeded to explain what my research was about. Bandile kept nodding and said 'yes' to all to make questions when I asked him if he understood the aim of the study. However, I had a nagging feeling that language might have been an issue. As I proceeded with the interview, Bandile's answers remained short and without much detail. He seemed to struggle with the abstract nature of the metaphor of life being like a book. I immediately felt annoyed and thought that the interview would be of little value, as I would not be able to obtain any relevant data, considering that his answers were so short. I kept going and sensed that Bandile struggled to answer the questions. I was not sure if it was the nature of the content that made him uncomfortable or him not understanding the questions correctly. I checked in with him to see how he was doing. He kept saying he was fine and that we could continue interviewing. I had to rephrase questions quite a few times and probe to obtain more answers from here. I felt under pressure, and I am sure he also felt it. However, as time went he told me more about his loss. I was unprepared to learn that Bandile in fact lost both his parents. He seemed to trust me at this point, as he told me how

he was abused and struggled with substance use. Despite him opening up, his story still felt incoherent and fragmented. Also, it felt like I was talking to a much younger child, not an older late adolescent. But after about 20 minutes, Bandile abruptly said he was tired and that he wanted to stop the interview. At this point, I felt that I started getting more meaningful answers, and I felt disappointed that he wanted to stop. I knew ethically that I could not continue, and we terminated the interview. I tried to debrief him, and he said he just felt tired. I did actually notice that he was yawning quite a few times. He apparently had quite a long day. I was worried that he might be triggered, but his non-verbal language did not communicate much distress. I did give him the option to continue if he wanted to, and he could just let the head psychologist know. As Bandile left, I reminded myself of a much earlier conversation I had with my supervisor about the nature of the data. Not all stories had to be perfect. In fact, the focus should not be solely on the content, but also on the process. Even as I am writing now, I realise that today's interview reflects a much more significant event. Because of all his trauma, he would find it difficult to narrate his story. Trauma does fragment one's telling of your life story. I knew this theoretically, but had to remind myself of this, as I reflected on Bandile's interview. His circumstances are so vastly different from mine. Yet, I could recognise the resilience in this young man. His trauma probably has resulted in severe developmental delays. That probably explained his more childlike demeanour. It made me think about how loss and trauma could also impact one's cognitive development. Bandile's basic wants and needs seemed so unsophisticated – he wanted to belong and wanted to be loved. His trauma disrupted his life story, his narrative identity in profound ways.

## Appendix I: Ethical Clearance (GHREC)



### GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

04-Sep-2020

Dear Mr Schouwink, Frederik F

#### Ethics Committee feedback

Research Project Title:

**Narrative identities of late adolescent males who experienced parental loss**

With reference to your application for ethical clearance for your research: Find attached the letter and decision from the GHREC meeting.

Ethics Admin

205 Nelson Mandela  
Drive  
Park West  
Bloemfontein 9301  
South Africa

P.O. Box 339  
Bloemfontein 9300  
Tel. 051 401 9398 /  
7619 / 3682  
[RMS@UFS.ac.za](mailto:RMS@UFS.ac.za)  
[www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za)





**GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)**

02-Sep-2020

Dear Mr Frederik Schouwink

**Application Approved**

Research Project Title:

**Narrative identities of late adolescent males who experienced parental loss**

Ethical Clearance number:

**UFS-HSD2020/0563/0209**

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.

**Outcome: Approved**

For the safety of both the researcher and the participants, please ensure that all relevant and applicable government guidelines related to COVID-19 are strictly followed.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Adri Du Plessis**

**Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee**

*Adri Du Plessis*

**Date:**  
**2020.09.02**  
**16:31:16**  
**+02'00'**

205 Nelson Mandela  
 Drive  
 Park West  
 Bloemfontein 9301  
 South Africa

P.O. Box 339  
 Bloemfontein 9300  
 Tel: +27 (0)51 401  
 9337  
[duplessisA@ufs.ac.za](mailto:duplessisA@ufs.ac.za)  
[www.ufs.ac.za](http://www.ufs.ac.za)



## Appendix J: Turnitin Report

### Final Submission D Psych 17 Jan 2023

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STUDENT PAPERS

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