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## Preliminary Findings of the Long Term Effects of the Death of a Peer while in High School

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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF THE LONG  
TERM EFFECTS OF THE DEATH OF A  
PEER WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL

Jenny M. Bradley

38 Pages

December 2013

Studies exploring death and bereavement experiences during adolescence have emerged only in recent decades. A plethora of material has appeared since then, with attention paid to adolescents grieving over a parent's death, a sibling's death, and their own impending death (Balk, 1991). Although more than 2 million children and adolescents experience the death of a close relative each year, a substantial number experience the death of a friend (Balk, Obrien Goodenow & Espin), Rheingold et. al, 2003). Very little research has been conducted pertaining to individuals who have experienced the death of a peer while in high school and the long term effects that event held for them months and years afterward remain misunderstood at best. There is a need for more understanding about the trajectory of adolescent grief following the death of a peer. Graham's (1997) Motivational Sequence provides a relevant methodology for this research as it applies to how the individuals process the event, through thinking, feeling, and acting and will be explored based on their responses. This study will address this gap from past studies and seek to create an understanding of a change in individual perception

of themselves as well as other relationships throughout the months, years, and decades after the death of a peer while in high school.

This preliminary study will investigate how the death of a peer in high school can potentially change 1) view of self, 2) view of relationships 3) thoughts of their own mortality, and 4) how best to measure and explain any effects. These findings will improve understanding of what long term affects exist as well as the need for further expansion of the trajectory of grief and loss research.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF THE LONG  
TERM EFFECTS OF THE DEATH OF A  
PEER WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL

JENNY M. BRADLEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2013

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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF THE LONG  
TERM EFFECTS OF THE DEATH OF A  
PEER WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL

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It is with my deepest gratitude that I thank Dr. Bill Anderson, Dr. Jennifer Banning and Dr. Connor Walters for their guidance, support, patience and sense of humor throughout this process. Without my committee's dedication, I would have never completed this very important scholarly work.

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I would also like to thank the members of the Streator High School class of 1986 and 1987 who participated in this study. Without your willingness to share your feelings, thoughts and memories of our peers with whom we have lost, I would not have been able to complete this work, and complete this thesis.

This thesis is dedicated to Jenny Baker, whose memory I will always hold closest to my heart, and with whom was the inspiration to continue to complete this scholarly feat. Best friends forever...

J.M.B.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

#### **Introduction**

According to the Center for Disease Control, 10,887 deaths occurred for adolescents ages 15-19 in 2011, with the leading cause being teens behind the wheel and peer passengers. However, more than 2 million children and adolescents experience the death of a close relative each year, with another substantial number experiencing the death of a friend (Balk, 1991; O'Brien, Goodenow & Espin, 1991). Although, studies exploring death and bereavement experiences during adolescence, however, have emerged only in recent decades. A good deal of material has appeared since then, with greater attention paid to adolescents bereaved over a parent's death, a sibling's death, or their own impending death (Balk, 1991).

Little is known about the process of loss of a friend in an adolescent's life. As a result, the actual number of adolescents who are affected by the unexpected loss of a peer is not clear (O'Brien, Goodenow & Espin 1991; Rheingold, 2001). Many individuals who had experienced the death of a peer during adolescence continued to struggle with the grieving process as adults (Balk, 1991). Research needs in this field of study include longitudinal investigations into the trajectory of adolescent bereavement, development of theoretical models to explain adolescent bereavement, and integration with the traditional

areas of adolescence inquiry. Such as cognitive development, moral reasoning, gender socialization, and identity formation (Balk, 1991).

O'Brien, Goodenow & Espin (1991) noted that one of the ways adolescents define themselves is through relationships with their peers, as adolescent maturation typically benefits from peer relationships. Evidence also underscores that peers provide a safe base for developing interpersonal intimacy outside one's own family and independence from parents (Balk, Zaengle & Corr, 2011).

Very little research has been conducted pertaining to individuals who have experienced the death of a peer. The long term effects that the event held for them months and years after that death remain unexplored at best. There is a need for more development of data about the trajectory of adolescent grief following the death of a peer. No specific research documenting bereavement during early, middle and later adolescence has been located. Also missing for existing research is an understanding of do, or how, bereaved adolescents cope differently than their unaffected peers (Balk, 2011). This study will seek to address this gap by documenting perceived changes in an individual's perception of themselves as well as other relationships throughout the months, years, and decades after the death of a peer while in high school.

Research has demonstrated that exposure to traumatic events during childhood and adolescence is associated with severe and devastating emotional and behavioral outcomes. These emotional and behavioral difficulties can be associated with significant and lasting disruption in normal development, as well as into adulthood (Balk, 1991).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Due to limited research in the specific population being examined here, this study will be to seek to discover any potential link between the loss and identity and the meaning of that loss to individuals. This will be further reviewed utilizing the Symbolic Interactionism (White & Klein, 2008) perspective and Motivational Sequence (Graham, 1997). This study will also look at how a specific adolescent population develops after the loss of a peer and explore how that loss affected or changed their perception of relationships, more pointedly friendships soon after the death and over a 20 year period following

### **Research Questions**

This current study will investigate:

How the death of a peer in high school can potentially change

- 1) view of self,
- 2) view of relationships
- 3) thoughts of their own mortality, and
- 4) how best to measure and explain any effects.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Researching how the death of a friend in adolescence, specifically in high school, can affect a person for the long term would likely increase awareness of identity formation. Erik Erikson's (1959) term for the *crisis* typical of the adolescent stage of life. At this stage, individuals may follow the healthy path of establishing a clear and definite sense of who they are and how they fit into the world around them, or follow the unhealthy alternative of failing to form a timely, stable and secure identity. Erikson saw adolescence as the time when identity issues are most prominent and most crucial to development (Arnett, 2010). Many adolescents who experienced the death of a peer are affected by the death, but are much less likely to be seen as bereaved (Balk, 1991). This is usually due to the fact that the bereavement of the families takes precedence. Peer bereavement in adolescence is then perhaps a matter of *disenfranchised grief* and adolescents who are bereaved over a friend's death become *forgotten grievers* (Balk, 1991). As a culture, Americans often try to shield children from experiencing the pain of bereavement and as a consequence these children become the "overlooked mourners of society" (Williams, 2009, p70). However, in a study by Oltjenbruns (1991), adolescents reported that experiencing grief led them to a deeper appreciation for life, greater concern for loved ones, stronger emotional bonds with others, and emotional strength.

## **Adolescent Bereavement**

Existing studies that have focused on the effects of adolescent bereavement include findings about personality, self-concept, conversing about death, emotions, use of social support and effects on school work (Balk, 1991). Anger and fear predominate cognitive responses in middle adolescence, seeing the world as dangerous, making one vulnerable. Experienced death has made clear that life is unpredictable, eliciting fear in the adolescent and also anger. Fear also marks the core issue of self-image, as the adolescent in grief fears losing competency or fears appearing incompetent (Balk, 2011). Bereavement produces intense and enduring emotional stress that outsiders seldom appreciate. It is not uncommon to hear that bereaved adolescents consider themselves more mature than their peers because of what coping with bereavement has taught them (Balk, 1991).

A second small group of studies focused on the development during adolescence and role of peers in adolescent development (Balk, 1991; Malone, 2011). As Malone states, mourning a peer can be a devastating experience for any adolescent, leaving an indelible mark upon the landscape of adolescent emotional, cognitive and social development (Malone, 2007). An adolescent's grief experience is profoundly personal, and can be more unexpectedly intense, intermittent, and overwhelming than the grief adults experience (Noppe & Noppe, 2004). O'Brien, Goodenow & Espin (1991) explored adolescent reactions to the death of a peer by other means other than suicide and reported that even after a few years, adolescents were still struggling through the grieving process. The death of a peer seems to have a long lasting impact upon the adolescent's life and implications for further research were suggested. Therefore, adolescent bereavement

presents an extremely serious life crisis at a time when development is marked by significant physical, cognitive, moral, interpersonal and psychological transitions (Balk).

Research has demonstrated that exposure to traumatic events during childhood and adolescence is associated with severe and devastating emotional and behavioral outcomes. These emotional and behavioral difficulties can be associated with significant and lasting disruption in normal development that can be exhibited into adulthood.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

The symbolic interaction perspective (White & Klein, 2008) is based on how humans continually develop a complex set of symbols to give meaning to the world (Plunkett, 2013). It is through interaction with others that humans develop a concept of larger social structures and also self-concept (Plunkett, 2013). Symbolic Interactionism states that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning they have created, therefore, if we wish to understand human behavior we must know how people define potential symbols such as, events, individuals, groups, structures, they encounter in their environment (Plunkett). This theory has the assumption that people are conscious and self-reflective beings who actively shape their own behavior. People are purposeful creatures who act in, and toward, situations. Through the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, identity is looked at through the eyes of adolescents experiencing grief. The theory is the only one that focuses on sense of self and how we are perceived by others (White & Klein, 2008). Other sources have provided a detailed history of Symbolic Interactionism: Plunkett, 2013

Graham (1997) describes a very comparable process as being *Motivational Sequence*. Our thoughts tell how to feel and our feelings tell us what to do. She adds that much of what the relationship between what people think and the way they intend to behave can be explained by how they feel. In other words it can be described as Thinking-Feeling-Acting. Thoughts are not emotion free because the parts of a physiological system are never unrelated; emotions are not devoid of thought. There is a symbiotic relationship between the cognitive and affective ways of knowing (Webster & Richardson, 1993).

### **Adolescent Identity**

Identity is defined as an individual's perception of their characteristics and abilities, their beliefs and values, their relations to others, and how their lives fit in into the world around them. It is the adolescent's capacity for self-reflection that makes consideration of identity issues possible (Arnett, 2010) and the assumptions of symbolic interactionism (Plunkett, 2013) applicable. In Erikson's (1959) theory of psycho-social development, each period of life is characterized by a distinctive developmental issue or "crisis." Each of these crises holds the potential for a healthier or less healthy path. In adolescence the crisis is identity versus identity confusion. This implicit focus in adolescence on identity development leads to adolescent's image of self. Though not age specific, Symbolic Interactionism comparatively states that individuals develop both a concept of self and their identities through social interaction (White & Klein, 2008). Therefore, if we wish to understand human behavior, we must know how people define things-objects, events they encounter in their environment (White & Klein).



Adolescents rely heavily on their peers for moral support, guidance, reflectivity, feedback, and camaraderie. The teenage years are when adolescents learn about themselves and develop their personal identities through their social interactions (Erikson, 1959). Thus teenagers have a heightened sensitivity and vulnerability to peer issues and traumas. When a friend dies, their identity development may be affected as they struggle to answer the question, “who am I?” Are they the same person/identity they were before the death (Williams & Merten, 2009)? Oltjenbruns (1991) said that death challenges the personal fable as adolescents realize that if the memory of their deceased friend can fade, so could their own friends forget them if they were to die. The death of a peer forces teenagers to take note of their impermanence in the world while feeling powerful emotions with little self-regulation (Williams& Merten, 2008).

Adolescents have a tendency to see situations and issues in polarized terms an act is either right or wrong, with no in between. This tendency is referred to as *dualistic* thinking and is most seen in adolescents and first year college students (White & Klein, 2008). While interacting with others, individuals monitor others’ reactions to the self and use that feedback to formulate and update their self-concept, in terms of who they perceive themselves to be. The concept of imaginary audience (Arnett, 2010), which is the adolescent’s awareness of how they appear to others, makes them more self-conscious than ever before. The impact of reflected appraisals should typically be heightened in adolescence because individuals preoccupation with identity development at this life stage and their enhanced ability to interpret others’ impressions of self accurately (Brown, Steinberg, & Von Bank, 2007).

## **Roles That Peers Play in Adolescence**

Peer groups are usually small groups of close friends with similar ages and overlapping activities (Binnaz Kiran-Esin, Jackson, & Rodriguez-Tome, 1993) . Youth in middle adolescence place considerable importance on being members of a popular peer group, although some individuals gravitate toward groups associated with other interests. In comparison to later adolescents, early and middle adolescents are more vulnerable to their peer groups' pressure for social conformity (Balk, Zaengle & Corr, 2011). Contrary to popular belief, adolescent maturation typically benefits from peer relationships (Balk et al.) Interacting with peers provides opportunities to develop social skills, building social intelligence (Balk et.al.). Engaging with peers provides opportunities to learn and practice cooperative, helpful, reinforcing, and friendly interactions. The amount of time spent with friends increases, and friends become increasingly significant as confidants and as sources of personal advice and emotional support (Arnett, 2010). Being the member of a peer group is one of the primary experiences of American adolescence.

Erikson (1959) states the identity formation takes place in adolescence, and to experience a loss of a peer in that time of development would have to affect an individual's identity in a permanent way. Within Erikson's overarching task, or *crisis*, adolescents also need to develop a stable sense of personal identity or self-concept, separate from their family, form appropriate and satisfying relationships with peers, and begin to think about future career choices. Grieving could conceivably create a double crisis in which situational considerations overlay and, to some extent, parallel normal development challenges. For bereaved adolescents, experiences involving searching and disorganization are often intertwined with the normal developmental tasks of achieving

mastery or competence, intimacy, and emotional separation from their parents. At times it may be unclear which aspects of adolescent grieving emerge from development and which from bereavement (Corr & Nabe, 2003).

### **Peer Death Research**

While there has been much research involving how different types of death affect adolescents, the majority are about the loss of a parent, not a peer (O'Brien Goodenow & Espin, 1991). Adolescent bereavement over the death of a peer has been sparsely investigated, and how those adolescents are affected by that death later on in their lives is noticeably lacking in current research. (McNeil, 1991). Survey work with college undergrads indicated that many youth knew a close friend who had died during the college youth's middle or late adolescent years. Over 30% of the sample reported that a close friend had died within the past 12 months and over 45% reported the death of a close friend within the past 2 years. According to Balk, Zaengle and Corr (2011), most research needs to be focused on the effects of the death of a friend. What is needed is longitudinal research that tests a model of early, middle and later adolescents. There can be current topics for bereavement researchers, such as, continuing bonds, trajectories of grieving, the dual process approach to coping with loss, disenfranchised grief, and prolonged grief disorder (Balk, 2011).

The death of a peer seems to have a long lasting impact upon the adolescent's life (O'Brien, Goodenow, & Espin, 1991). Schools are quick to respond to the death of a family member or the suicide of a student, but little attention seems to be given to the "ordinary" death of a peer. (O'Brien et. al.) Results indicated that mourning a peer (best

friend, close friend, or even an acquaintance) can be a devastating experience for any adolescence.

Five surveys of adolescent bereavement, taken in the late 1980's and early 1990's with a sample from undergraduate population from Kansas State University indicated that at any time 23% of students are in the first year of grief over a family member and at least 27% are in the first year of grief over a friend's death. The percentages increase around 47% in each category when the deaths occurred in the past 2 years (Stroebe,2001). According to Fleming and Adolph (1986) bereavement requires adolescents to cope behaviorally, cognitively, and affectively with five core issues that vary according to the maturational phase of the adolescent. These five core issues are trusting, forging relationships marked by belonging, believing the world is fair and just, and developing a confident self-image.

### **Bereavement as a Non-Normative Event**

Due to the fact that death during adolescence is not anticipated, bereavement over a peer's death is not considered a typical experience during adolescent maturation; it is a non-normative experience. It is therefore important to understand the impact on surviving peers. Adolescent bereavement is particularly vulnerable to being *disenfranchised* (Balk, Zaengle & Corr, 2011). Many adolescents who had known a peer who had died are affected by the death but are less likely to be seen as bereaved "since the bereavement of the families takes precedence" (Raphael, 1983, p. 146). A sense of stigma, often including embarrassment and shame, is then attached to this disenfranchised grief (Balk

et.al., 2011). As stated earlier, grief associated with a friend's death has been rarely studied and may be discounted by others (Corr & Corr 2003; Oltjenbruns 1996).

Nearly 74 percent of all deaths of American adolescents are caused by accidents, homicide or suicide, which are associated with trauma and violence and are, to some extent, preventable (Corr, Nabe, & Corr 2003; Hoyert et al. 2001). The nature of these deaths means that adolescents often must confront death without any warning or time for preparation. There is no time to prepare to say "goodbye." A friend's sudden death personifies the inability to predict or control the future.

Malone (2007) states that an adolescent's exposure to death is high, approximately 40% of those adolescents reported the death of a peer. Each of the estimated annual 14,000 deaths of adolescents has an impact on friends, classmates and peers, with adolescent girls experiencing more deaths within a one year time frame than boys (Malone). The sudden and unexpected nature of adolescent deaths appears to be a common experience that deeply affects adolescent girls and puts them at risk for a wide range of negative physical, emotional, social and cognitive outcomes. Malone also outlined a task-oriented group intervention that meets the developmental emotional, cognitive, and gender-specific needs to adolescent girls grieving the death of a peer. All four domains were measured on an 83-item self-report questionnaire.

Pre and posttest scores were compared to assess changes in physical, emotional, social and cognitive responses to grief. Scores on the LRL indicated that girls did exhibit significantly reduced emotional, social, and cognitive grief responses, with reductions maintained through the first posttest. The lessening of physical grief responses can ultimately be maintained as evidenced by the lowest scores at the third posttest, 60 days

after the final AGL group (Malone, 2011). Malone states that the developmental aspect of bereavement adds another complex element to consider when addressing the needs of adolescent girls who have experienced the death of a peer. There remains a significant need for research in the area of the impact of peer death on adolescent girls. Since relatively few studies have utilized standard assessments with grieving adolescents it is suggested that future study and research apply the use of instruments to the task-oriented group (Malone).

According to a study by Rheingold, 2004, a substantial number of adolescents experience the death of a friend. This finding has been corroborated by several other studies as well (Balk; 2011, Malone, 2011; O'Brien et.al., 1991). Rheingold et al. investigated various factors that may be associated with exposure to the death of a family member or friend, including age, race, socioeconomic status, and mental health, in a nationally representative sample of 4023 adolescents. Results indicated that adolescent girls, adolescents with lower household incomes, and African American adolescents were at increased risk of death of family member within the past year. Death of a friend was related to depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse/dependence. In relation to the three outcome variables, death of a friend did correlate with diagnosis of PTSD, MDE, and SA/D. The results also suggested in this particular study that the exposure to the death of a loved one may not be only associated with normal grief reaction but may also place some adolescents at risk for a wide range of negative mental and physical outcomes.

## **Coping with Peer's Death**

Skyler and Hartley (1987) described bereaved friends to be a *hidden population*. The actual death may be viewed by parents, teachers and friends as seemingly less important in an adolescent's life, especially if the peer was not someone the adolescent appeared to be very close to (Malone, 2011). Skyler and Hartley concluded that bereavement over a friend's death closely parallels the mourning process experienced at the death of a family member. They also point out that researchers need to pay attention to the development of persuasive data about the trajectory of adolescent grief following a death, the integration of bereavement investigations with the traditional topics making adolescent research. Until a representative sample of bereaved adolescents is followed over sufficient time, perhaps up to 5 years past a death event, evidence will be lacking as to how the grief process ebbs and flows for adolescents following a sibling's death. This could also very likely be attributed to the death of a peer while in adolescence as well (Balk, 2011).

It has been noted that the adolescent grief experience is profoundly personal in nature. They grieve more intensely than adults, but the grief may be expressed in short outbursts, or there may be a concerted effort to control emotions (Oltjenbruns, 1996). Individuals at this age experience *adolescent egocentrism* (Arnett, 2010), generally believing that their experiences are completely unique unto themselves and that everyone is paying attention to them. Bereaved middle adolescents are acutely aware that others have no clue what they are going through. It is not uncommon to hear that bereaved adolescents consider themselves more mature than their peers because of what coping with bereavement has taught them (Balk, 2011). Noppe & Noppe (2004) also stated that

adolescent's grief may follow a life-long developmental trajectory. That is, the loss may be continued to be felt throughout the adolescent's life span, as he or she graduates from high school, college, finds a job, gets married and has children, and grows older than the parent, sibling, or friend who has died (Noppe & Noppe). Thus, the relationship that ended with the death will continue on in the thoughts of the adolescent and will be reconstructed throughout the life span (Noppe & Noppe, 1997).

Adolescence, with its array of charged developmental tasks, is a tender time for any major crisis-bereavement at this stage may promote, interfere with, or alter existing developmental trajectories (Oltjenbruns, 1991). Following the sudden death of a peer, most adolescents experience some form of sadness, shock, disbelief, surprise, anger and confusion (Oltjenbruns; Williams & Merten, 2009). Teenagers, especially girls, may talk about their feelings, turn to religion, look for any positive outcomes from the stressor, and vent; boys are more likely to use humor or to disengage via substance use (Corr, 2003; Williams & Merten, 2009).



## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

After approval from a large Midwestern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), a participant group was emailed an informed consent form (Appendix B). Participants of this group were a convenience sample of men and women from a small community in central Illinois who had lost a peer while in high school 20+ years prior. Email addresses were obtained through a social network site.

#### **Instruments**

The Loss Response List (LRL) (Malone, 2010; Wheeler & Austin, 1999), a standardized self-report scale developed to measure grief responses in adolescent girls was used. Although it was initially developed to measure the physical, emotional, social and cognitive grief responses to loss among adolescent girls who experienced early pregnancy loss, it is also sensitive to adolescents who have experienced losses including the death of a parent, other family member, a friend, peer, or significant other (Malone). It has also been noted that it could be a useful tool for researchers to identify changes in grief responses over time (Wheeler & Austin, 1999). The LRL is an 83 item self-report questionnaire that contains grief responses in 4 domains 27 physical questions, 25 emotional questions, 11 social questions, 20 cognitive questions.

Of the 27 physical questions in the original LRL, 11 remain in this current study, omitting original numbers 6-8, 11-13, 15, 17-25 and 27. An abbreviated form of the LRL was used for this study. Omitted questions were not used because they were not suitable to this specific population and the purpose of this study, given their focus towards an adolescent group of females who had experienced a loss within a shorter time frame. One question was added asking if the participants remembered any physical affects from the loss (See Appendix C page 33). The 25 emotional questions portion of the LRL was reduced to 10 questions, omitting original questions 29-33, 38-42, 44-47, 49, and 52. The statement, "I still have feelings of disbelief that the person is gone," was added (Appendix C, page 35) due to the long length of time since the participants experienced their loss. The 11 social questions portion of the LRL was paired down to 5 questions, taking out questions, 53, 56, 58-61, and 63.. Finally, of the 20 cognitive questions from the original LRL, questions for the purpose of this study. The following questions were taken out: 65-66, 69, 71-74, 76-82.

Quantitative grief responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (I have not had this feeling/ experience at all since my loss) to 5 (I have had this feeling/experience all of the time since my loss). Descriptive comparisons were made and used to analyze the group variances on the 4 subscales of the LRL (physical, emotional, social, and cognitive grief responses). Comparisons were also made between the 4 domains and the qualitative questions to determine how this experience had common themes between participants in how the death of a peer affected their relationships and self-identity as well as comparisons between qualitative and quantitative responses applying Motivational Sequence (Graham, 1997) to the responses.

## **Procedures**

Quantitative data was gathered via a link emailed to each participant. The instrument included four subscales relating to effects from physical, emotional, social and cognitive grief. A qualitative component allowed each participant to answer open-ended questions (Appendix C) concerning the time of the peer's death and how the trajectory of those feeling appeared to the present time. Qualitative data was gathered via email through select survey, which guards and anonymity. Of the 25 returned responses, five were chosen at random for this preliminary study for analysis and refinement of methodology using Malone's terminology and the similar terminology of Motivational Sequence (Graham, 1997), specifically addressing the respondents answers in terms of thinking, feeling and acting.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Quantitative Results**

The results of all four domains of physical, emotional, social and cognitive grief responses on the LRL from this study's participants in comparison to Malone's (2010) Pretest Are presented here. The means for Malone's pretest score are as follows: *Physical* (M=2.73, SD =.68), *Emotional* (M= 3.09, SD = .77), *Social* (M=3.35, SD= .74), *Cognitive* (M=3.27, SD=.74). The following scores for this study are as follows: *Physical* (M=2.1, SD=.81), *Emotional* (M=2.23, SD=.54), *Social* (M=2.52, SD= .81), *Cognitive* (M=2.3, SD=.84).

The participant responses presented were coded as Theme 1, *Thinking*, Theme 2, *Feeling*, and Theme 3, *Acting*, consistent with Graham's (1999) Motivational Sequence Theory. This was a purposeful modification of Malone's (2010) original four domains: cognitive, emotional, physical, and social. After qualitative responses were coded (Straus & Corbin, 1998) as thinking, feeling or acting, (Graham, 1999) in an intentional effort to build on the coding system of Malone (Appendix C), 14 responses were coded as Thinking/Cognitive, 9 as Feeling/Affective, 19 as Acting/Social.

### **Theme 1. “Thinking”**

Of the five participants randomly chosen it appeared that they had thoughts of their peers death and symbols that triggered those thoughts, as reflected in the quantitative responses and qualitative responses. Participant 2 chose 5 on the quantitative scale for the question: “Pictures about the loss will pop in my head” which means they have had this experience all of the time since the loss.

*My mother had a scanner when I was a kid and she told me when I woke that morning.*

Remembering exactly how they heard about the loss 26 years ago.

*I think about the loss when I do not mean to...*

This participant also gave the statement,

*Yes, I hold onto friendships almost forever, and forgive almost anything...*

In response to the question: Did the death of your peer change how you viewed your relationships/friendships then and currently, if so how? Participant 3 chose 4 on the quantitative scale for the question: “I felt like people will have this happen to them” which means that they have had this feeling/experience most of the time since my loss. Participant 3 stated in the open ended portion addressing the question how the loss affected what type of friend they are now and in what way, they responded:

*I tend to not get as close to people.*

### **Theme 2. “Feeling”**

Participant 1 chose 4 on the quantitative scale for feeling sad when they think about the loss, as well as feeling angry about any reminder of the loss makes them feel sad. Participant 4 had scored a 5 for feeling sad about the loss and participant’s 2 and 3

answered 4 for having feelings of anger about the loss of the peer. Participant 1 responded about the loss saying,

*I wish we had stayed closer growing up. Just that I miss her and in some ways regret not making more of an effort to stay close.*

Participant 2 responded,

It does make me honor people's feelings and express that I love people more freely, as you never really know.

This participant also stated,

*My lover feels I say I LOVE YOU too often and to too many people. He doesn't quite understand I feel different forms of love, and many people I don't think realize it.*

### **Theme 3. "Acting"**

Motivational Sequence (Graham, 1997) tells us that, thoughts tell us how to feel and our feeling tells us what to do. Of the 5 random participants that were chosen, 4 reported that when they think about the impact of the loss of their peer, it changed their behavior and view of friends and relationships. Participant 1 stated,

*I try to not take any friendships for granted. I understand that tomorrow is not guaranteed and I try to keep that in mind.*

Participant 5 stated,

*I think it reminds you life is so short so make the most of it.*

This participant when asked on the quantitative portion chose 5 when asked I tried not to talk about it, and I tried to act like nothing happened. Participant 3 also scored a 4 on the quantitative scale for I tried to act like nothing happened and I wanted to talk about my loss. This same participant stated in response to the question, did the death of your peer change how you viewed your relationships/friendships then and currently?

*Yes, I realize they can be gone...*

They also stated, in response at what type of friend you are now?

*I tend to not get as close to people.*

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study shed light on an understudied group of individuals who while in high school experienced the death of a peer. This study provides an opportunity to show how the loss of a peer affected them as well as showing the disenfranchised grief and the effects on relationships, then and now. The prevalent themes that coincide with Motivational Sequence Theory (Graham, 1999) coincide with the individual's responses. A relationship between thinking and feeling must exist and provide a valuable extension of Malone's four domains. Thoughts, emotions, and actions influence each other and the parts of the physiological system are never unrelated.

Erikson (1959) stated that adolescence is a critical period when identity is forming. To experience the disruption of that development due to the death of a friend will naturally cause disruption of identity, sense of self, and could lead to identity confusion. Erikson also argued that it is important to establish a clear identity in adolescence as a basis for commitments in adult life and a foundation for development of the later stages of development (Arnett, 2010). When individuals experience the death of a peer in adolescence it can't help but affect how they think about relationships later. Preliminary results from this study show that there is evidence to suggest that individuals



who experienced this type of loss have a deeper sense of empathy and appreciation for how fragile life can be.

In response to research question #1, concerning the individual's view of self, there was an inability to explain with the limited number of preliminary participants, (N=5). However, it appears likely that further research will show evidence of identity change at a later time. Research question #2, participant's perception of relationships Participant #2 stated in response to this question

*...it does make me honor people's feelings and express that I love people more freely, as you never really know.*

Hypothesis question #3, related to the participant's thoughts of their own mortality, Participant # 5 made the statement,

*I think it reminds you life is so short so make the most of it.*

When asked if this death affected current relationships with friends or mates? Participant #2 responded to this with the statement,

*Yes, I hold onto friendships almost forever and forgive almost anything.*

Perhaps having gone through this type of loss has triggered thoughts from those individuals that they may not have had otherwise in regards to how to live their life and appreciation for the time they have here and now.

Symbolic Interaction (White & Klein, 2008) assumes that individuals develop self-concepts through social interaction. This is applicable to a peer relationship in high school when that connection is lost due to the death of that peer. How individuals work through the process of thinking-feeling-acting in this situation effectively explains how these participants looked at relationships and themselves. The individual's responses

(N=5) analyzed in this study appears to make meaning out of the death of the peer and defined the loss 20+ years later to hold a deeper understanding between the sadness at the time of the death and how it shaped their need to appreciate the time we have here.

### **Conclusions**

Previous research on adolescent grief has focused primarily on the loss of a parent or sibling (Balk, 2011; O'brien et.al. 1991; Rheingold et. al, 2003), with very little research on the death of a peer during this time of developing identity. Preliminary results from this study suggest that there are long lasting effects over time on an individual that has experienced this type of loss. This study was limited to a small select group of individuals, future studies will require a larger sample, as well as explore the impact of gender on long term effects. Although this study shared a deeper understanding of how the sequence of grief affected these individuals over time, another study following individuals at intervals of 5, 10, 15, and 20 years would be beneficial for researchers to follow that trajectory and identify the ebbs and flows of grief. Future studies could also take into account family circumstances as well as how parenting styles were affected because of the loss.

The LRL scale (Malone, 2010) was a useful tool in measuring the individuals cognitive, emotional, physical and emotional responses to the quantitative questions. Motivational Sequence was an appropriate pairing with Malone's scale as it complimented the qualitative portion of the survey when addressing the individual's responses and how they were able to make meaning of the death of their peer. In other

words, much of the relationship between what people think and the way they intend to behave can be explained by how they feel (Graham, 1997).

When applying the concept of disenfranchised grief to these participants the preliminary results shows that the loss they have experienced may have changed their expectations about life. Ambiguous losses lack clarity and can lead to sharply different assessments of exactly who or what has been lost (Boss, 2004). There may even be some question as to whether or not a loss has occurred, or if this is a death that should generate deep emotional response. At the time of the death, participants could have certainly had uncertainty as to respond. They may have even avoided the bereaved because they are uncomfortable with the uncertainty, or put off by intense emotions resulting from an "insignificant" loss (Doka, 2002). Participants who experienced the death of a peer have shown through these preliminary results, signs of experiencing ambiguous loss as well as disenfranchised grief (Boss, 2004).

While this study was limited in terms of the sample size, it does begin to show how grief can follow individuals over time, and allowed individuals to reflect back on the meaning that the death of their peer changed perceptions of friends and their role in how they interact in relationships.

Lastly, It appears that the modified LRL (Malone, 2010), coupled with the qualitative elements used here was a successful methods for an initial exploration of this overlooked population. Furthermore, utilizing Graham's (1997) Motivational Sequence appears capable of moving from descriptive elements toward a sequences of internal events that are perhaps better suited to describe this trajectory, or sequence, of grieving.

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## APPENDIX A

### EMAIL TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

As many of you know I am currently in graduate school and working on my thesis. My topic of research is the effects of the death of a peer while in high school on self-identity. I was wondering if I could get a little help from my classmates and friends?

In the next couple months I would like to send you a survey with just 5 or so questions about this subject and I am also looking on how it affected you later after high school. Your answers will be confidential and I will not even know whose answers are whose. If you wouldn't mind sending me your emails so I can send you this survey I would appreciate your input. You could help not only in my research but also towards future kids who experience what we went through.

If you want to message me separate from this email please feel free! Thanks so much for your help!!!

Jenny

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

Hello,

My name is Jenny Bradley I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Bill Anderson in the Department of Family and Consumer Science at Illinois State University.

I am currently conducting a research study that will explore the effects of the death of a peer while in high school on individuals over time.

I am requesting your participation, which will involve your completing a questionnaire regarding your experiences since the loss of a peer while in high school. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Although no noticeable adverse events are anticipated, some individuals may experience psychological distress in completing the questionnaire, due to potential emotional discomfort in responding to some sensitive questions. For example, the survey will ask how you may have felt when told of your peer's death and to rate those feelings on a scale of 1-5. If you choose to participate, you may omit any question that you choose not to answer, or to withdraw completely from the study at any time. There will be no penalty. Although the results of the research study may be presented or published, your name will never be used.



Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation is further insight, and understanding of the effects that the death of a peer can have on an individual over time. This can aid in research and education for clinicians, counselors, and families in the future.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (309) 706-9769 or Dr. Bill Anderson at (309) 438-3256.

Sincerely,

Jenny Bradley

APPENDIX C  
SURVEY QUESTIONS

This group of questions is about the possible feelings and/ or experiences you may or may not have had since your loss. Each item can be rated from “1” to “5.” This rating scale is being used to find out if you have had these feelings/experiences and how strongly you have had them since your loss.

1=I have not had this feeling/experience at all since my loss.

2=I have had this feeling/experience a little since my loss.

3=I have had this feeling/experience somewhat since my loss.

4=I have had this feeling/experience most of the time since my loss.

5=I have had this feeling/experience all of the time since my loss.

As you read each statement, please select the number which best shows your feelings and experiences. If an item does not describe your feelings and experiences at all, please select “1.”

The following are questions about how your body felt after the loss.

1.	I felt weak	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I felt alright	1	2	3	4	5

3.	I didn't want to get out of bed	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I had stomach cramps	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I had headaches	1	2	3	4	5
6	I couldn't sleep	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I have dreams about my loss	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I had waves of strong feelings after my loss	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I didn't want to feel anything.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I felt empty inside	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I do not remember any physical affects from my loss.	1	2	3	4	5

The following are questions about your feeling after your loss

12.	I found myself crying when I don't want to when I think about the loss	1	2	3	4	5
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	of my peer.					
13.	I try not to let myself get upset when I think about the loss.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I feel sad when I think about the loss.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	I felt miserable when I thought about the loss.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I felt depressed when I thought about the loss.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	I felt angry about the loss.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	I felt my loss was a bad dream	1	2	3	4	5
19.	Any reminder of the loss will make me feel sad.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I still have feelings of disbelief that the	1	2	3	4	5

	person is gone.					
21	I had feelings of guilt after the loss.	1	2	3	4	5

The following questions are about how you felt about your relationships with family and friends after the loss of the peer.

22.	I tried not to talk about it.	1	2	3	4	5
23.	I tried to act like nothing happened.	1	2	3	4	5
24.	I felt like other people will have this happen to them.	1	2	3	4	5
25.	I wanted to talk about my loss.	1	2	3	4	5
26.	I tried to stay away from all reminders	1	2	3	4	5

The following questions are about the things you had thought about or thoughts that had crossed your mind since your loss.

27.	I still think "Why did this happen to	1	2	3	4	5
-----	--	---	---	---	---	---

	me?"					
28.	I wonder why God made my loss happen	1	2	3	4	5
29.	I try not to think about it.	1	2	3	4	5
30.	I think about the loss when I do not mean to.	1	2	3	4	5
31.	Pictures about the loss will pop into my head	1	2	3	4	5
32.	I wonder how this has affected me.	1	2	3	4	5

33. How did you learn about your peer's death (for example, phone call, school announcement)? Did you seek or feel supported from anyone? If so who, if not why?

34. How has the loss affected what type of friend you are, and in what way?

35. Did the death of the peer change how you viewed your relationships, if so how?

36. Looking back on the peer's death, did that experience change your view on death, or your thoughts of your own mortality?

37. Are there songs, movies, etc.... that evokes specific emotions or feelings that bring you back to the memory of your peer's death? What are they?