THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSING ONE'S FATHER IN THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By

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To mom and ma Jess, for your parenting ...... this is my tribute to you.
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SUMMARY

Since 1996, hundreds of thousands of children under the age of 7 have experienced the death of a parent in South Africa. Whilst this loss is considered to pose a risk for future development, the existing studies lack clarity as to how this experience acts upon the adult throughout life. To this end, this inquiry attempts to capture an in-depth understanding of this experience and stimulate awareness regarding the needs of bereaved children. Through a phenomenological approach this investigation focuses specifically on the personal experience of several adults who have experienced the death of a father during their pre-school years. An aspect of the inquiry explores the perceived role the father would have played in the context of their ongoing lives. Eight core themes are derived which reflect the perceptions of this loss.

The value of a phenomenological approach with relevance to the study of early bereavement is illuminated. Some limitations of this study are recognized and suggestions for future research are proposed. Based on the insights gleaned through this study, implications are brought to the fore that pertain to the general experience of early parental bereavement.
“there is always some element of pain... I always think of the idea of a crying baby, you don’t know what to do with your first child screaming; you want to put it down, but if you sit with it long enough you get to know what the cries mean - what and which ones... so that the more you sit with the discomfort, the more you are able to take care of it... it’s always there...”

Ken - participant
1.1 INTRODUCTION

The death of a loved one is an inescapable fact of life. When this occurs it brings with it the most overwhelming and painful of human emotions. Our sense of vulnerability intensifies, and we are faced with meeting inordinate psychological demands. But, when that loved one is perhaps one of two into whom almost all feelings are invested, and from whom all security and faith in the world is derived, the loss then, is unparalleled. This is the distinctive situation of a young child when a parent dies.

The influence of this momentous loss upon the child’s future adjustment is the source of much speculation. Not uncommonly, children are perceived to be very resilient, and so a quick rebound back to normalcy is expected. Equally assumed however, is that inevitably, the outcome is negative. Furman (1974) purports that for all children, it becomes a "lifelong burden" (p. 172). He explains that "above all, the death of a parent faces the child with an early excess of helplessness at the hands of fate, a need to accept the utterly unacceptable at a time when his mental resources are not yet equipped for doing so" (p. 172).
The relationship between early parental bereavement and subsequent outcome is however, complex. Loss of a parent occurs within a personal, family and social context and differences in variables at each level could be expected to influence the outcome. Yet, despite these differences, what can be assumed without cause for doubt is that profound loss always leaves its mark.

1.2 MOTIVATION AND AIM

Extensive reviews of the wealth of literature, that have previously been undertaken, point to early parent death as a risk factor for later psychopathology (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982; Finkelstein, 1988). However, these conclusions have primarily been generated from empirical studies of clinical populations. In contrast, there is a dearth of studies amongst adults who have suffered early parent death, but do not evidence overt psychiatric symptoms. This points to the assumption that this population is unaffected, or perhaps inconsequentially so. The relevant studies that do exist fail to provide clarity as to the impact (Barnes & Prosen, 1985; Dietrich, 1984; Hurd, 1999; Krause, 1993; Krause, 1998; Rainieri & Lester, 1997; Sklar & Harris, 1985). It may well be though, that immediate adjustment to the bereavement, or lack of overt clinical symptoms in later life, may not necessarily preclude emotional suffering, or some interference of functioning.
Furthermore, for children, the meanings, and so it follows, the consequences of a death of a parent are subject to multiple variables (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982; Bowlby, 1980; Buirski & Buirski, 1994; Christ, 2001; Furman, 1974; Huss, 1999). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all the variables in detail, the multiple variables necessarily include the age of the child, which parent has died, and the dynamics of the grieving process itself. Although there may be many commonalties then, this suggests that children who have experienced early parent death cannot be delineated as a homogenous group. All combined, this point to limits in our understanding of this experience as it affects later life.

This study will endeavour to make sense of the impact of early parent death on the lives and identities of adults, with the aim of providing an in-depth understanding of this experience. Specific focus will be upon the adult who has lost a father, prior to reaching the end of the Piagetian pre-operational period, or pre-school age, amongst the normative population. An aspect of the inquiry will seek to explore the perceived role the father would have played in the context of their ongoing lives. An opportunity will be created for several adults to describe their experience of this loss. By combining their meanings with the existing literature, a more comprehensive view may be realized. The study also aims to stimulate awareness regarding the needs of bereaved children. Present day living is endemic
with HIV infection, war, civil conflict and violence, which implicate increasing numbers of children at risk.

1.3 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

The death of a father, while the child is in the preschool years, carries with it particular significance for the affected persons. This study is concerned with what it means to experience this loss. In order to arrive at the essential meanings of those who have lived this experience, it is necessary to grasp the qualitative diversity of this experience.

Downdey (2000), in discussion of outcomes of childhood bereavement, emphasizes that the lack of a coherent conceptual research framework, designed to test hypotheses of clinical relevance, has hampered the development of systematic and satisfactory research in this area. Downdey (2000) further argues that the type of information specific to bereavement warrants data that can provide material rich in the detail of individual’s experiences, and as such provide insights of relevance to clinical practice. To this end, she states:

"To go beyond this and make a theoretical or research contribution in this relatively unchartered area, data need to be gathered and analysed within an appropriate qualitative
A phenomenological approach provides a mode of inquiry that elicits the meaning of another person’s experience. As a method, it allows for the direct exploration of conscious experience without presuppositions. The emphasis is on descriptions offered by participants rather than accounting for causality or origin. It attempts, as Kvale (1996) states "... to make the invisible visible." (p.53)

Because it is meaning, not measurement that this research seeks, a phenomenological approach will be followed. Through purposive sampling, three adults, who have experienced the death of a father prior to age six, will be engaged as participants. The data will be derived through conversation that attends to the participant’s own experience. Open ended, semi-structured interviews will be used to elicit participant’s descriptions of the nature of the experience itself. On completion the taped interviews will be transcribed and analysed, to enable the core themes of losing a father in early childhood to be identified.

1.4 OUTLINE OF THIS THESIS

Chapter 1 has provided an overview of this study. The theories that have informed childhood bereavement are introduced in Chapter 2, wherein the reader is
also provided with the pre-school child's comprehension of death. Both the subsequent and long-term reactions to parental death are presented. With relevance to this study, the role of fathers is discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 explains the stance of a qualitative paradigm, and argues for the value of a phenomenological approach to an investigation concerning the experience of early father death. This is followed by a discussion on methodology and design of this study in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 presents the main findings of this investigation. In conclusion, Chapter 7 offers an evaluation of this study with suggestions for avenues of further investigations. This culminates in a discussion of the implications that emerge from this inquiry.

1.5 CONCLUSION

This study will attempt to extract meaning of the experience of losing one's father in the pre-school years, and the effects of this on later life. Through employing a qualitative method based on phenomenology it will seek to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of this inherently personalized experience.
CHAPTER TWO

CHILDHOOD Bereavement

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The loss of a parent through death is touching the lives of thousands of children in South Africa. In 1996, (this being the most recently available data), approximately 571 465 children under the age of 7 experienced the death of a parent (Statistics S.A.). Undoubtedly, thousands of lives continue to be touched in this manner.

Curiously, whilst it is commonly held that this loss poses a risk for future development, the literature has failed in providing new research into both the complexity of the child's response to loss and its later impact (Downdey, 2000; Huss, 1999; Sanders, 1999; Thompson & Payne, 2000).

This chapter comprises a review of the major theories that have informed childhood bereavement. It attempts to provide an understanding of where a preschool child is situated at the time of this experience, by examining young children's comprehension of death and their subsequent reactions. Having gleaned some knowledge of these processes, the long-term reactions of early parental death are discussed.
Bereavement is the term used to denote a state of loss (Martin & Doka, 2000). Grief is the process of experiencing the psychological, social and physical reactions to one's perception of loss (Rando, 1991). It can be seen then that bereavement is an objective reality to which the reaction may be grief. Mourning, however, refers to the conscious and unconscious processes that gradually undo the psychological ties that had bound the mourner to the loved one, in order to adapt to, and cope with the loss (Rando, 1991). For the purposes of this study, bereavement is discussed as loss due to death. These terms, which relate to the loss experience are used interchangeably in the literature, and will be applied in the same manner in this study.

2.2 CHILDHOOD MOURNING: A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE

The potential for long-lasting destructive effects from parent loss in childhood has been partly attributed to the fact that young children lack the ability to undergo a mourning process. The debate over whether children have the capacity to engage in a mourning process akin to the process experienced by adults, has, however, been controversial (Buirski & Buirski, 1994). Accordingly, clinical practice in response to childhood bereavement experiences in the past century has been divided between a theory-driven psychodynamic perspective, and an experience-centred environmental perspective (Hurd, 1999).
Earlier views on how children perceive and respond to the death of a parent were dominated by Freud's (1917) theory as expressed in "Mourning and Melancholia" (Hurd, 1999). Freud considered mourning to be a normal reaction to the loss of a valued person, object or ideal. From this perspective, mourning involves a conscious separation of the libido from the lost object, a gradual reinstatement of reality, the emergence of a healthy ego, and a timely return to an emotionally stable life (Hurd, 1999). Implicit in this conception, is that mourning unfolds in successive stages, in which the reality and finality of the loss is accepted. The bereaved person then reacquires the capacity to love again.

Melancholia is considered to arise through the inability to separate the libido from the lost object, and the accompanying withdrawal of the loss from consciousness. This creates an internal ego conflict in which the ego both identifies with, and struggles to be free of the lost object. This internal conflict, played out in the unconscious, would likely emerge as symptoms of self-reproach and self-deprecation (Hurd, 1999).

The developmental incapacity of the child to comprehend death, as postulated by Freud, gave rise to the consensus amongst succeeding Freudian practitioners that children do not experience true mourning (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982). Consequently, the "later behaviour disorder" hypothesis, derived
from Freud's theory, assumed that children experiencing parental death were destined for depression, usually triggered by some experience of loss in late adolescence, or early adulthood (Hurd, 1999).

Beginning in the 1960's, Bowlby's studies on childhood mourning posited that children can, and do go through the process of mourning (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982). Unlike the Freudian perspective, Bowlby's (1980) use of the term "mourning" denotes "... a fairly wide array of psychological processes set in train by the loss of a loved person irrespective of their outcome" (p.17).

Based on the analysis of normal infant attachment behaviours, Bowlby (1980) describes a sequence of grieving behaviours through which infants process a severe loss. Initially, in response to separation from an attachment figure, young children protest vigorously. This is followed by despair, in which hope fades, and subsequently detachment or indifference ensues. During the first three years infant attachment is considered to be of highest intensity, and so constitutes a period of great vulnerability to separation. The nature of affectional bonds or attachments between children and parents serves as a prototype for future relationships throughout the life cycle. Separation from a parent through death may then predispose young children to the inability to bond with others,
leading to ineffective relationships in adulthood. (Bowlby, 1980).

Likening detachment to defensive processes, Bowlby (1980) contends this to be a regular constituent of mourning at every age. Bowlby (1980) argues that what characterizes pathology is not their occurrence, but the forms they take, and the degree to which they are reversible. Healthy mourning entails a reorganization of self and situation so that a timely resolution of the loss transpires. This likely occurs after a phase of yearning for the lost person, characterized by weeping, anger and restless searching, and a phase of disorganization and despair, characterized by withdrawal and sadness.

In infants and children, once set in motion, defensive processes tend to stabilize and persist. In a young child an experience of loss of an attachment figure is especially apt to evoke psychological processes of a kind that are crucial for psychopathology. Should the processes take the form of pathological variants of healthy mourning, this may lead to more or less severe dysfunction in later life (Bowlby, 1980). Herein lies a possible link between the childhood experience of loss and conditions of later life.

Bowlby (1980) concludes that the way in which children respond to the loss of a parent differs little from the ways in which adults mourn. In so
far as there are differences, these are attributed to the greater sensitivity of children to the conditions that precede, surround and follow a loss. Of most significance is the relationship with the deceased parent, the information provided to the child, participation in family grieving, and a comforting presence of a surviving parent or a trusted substitute. The more positive these factors are, the more likely healthy mourning can transpire. Children's greater vulnerability to the impact of bereavement may then be attributed to the influence of these conditions, coupled with their limited experiences with loss, and the potential to be overwhelmed when their attachment figure that represents comfort, is absent (Bowlby, 1980).

By virtue of these findings, Bowlby refutes the notion that children cannot experience true mourning. Children aged three and younger demonstrate emotional responses to loss (Bowlby, 1980), which can be mobilized by therapeutic assistance (Buirski & Buirski, 1994). As with adults, children's mourning can take a healthy or pathological course, thereby leading to different outcomes.

2.3 PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN'S CONCEPTION OF DEATH

Furman (1974) considers the child's awareness, comprehension and acknowledgement of the death of a loved one to be the indispensable first step of the mourning process. If problems arise later in life,
Furman (1974) believes it is most likely because this task has not been completed. This viewpoint poses the question then, as to how pre-school children understand death.

Comprehension of death develops in stages related both to the succession of levels of cognitive development as identified by Piaget (1929) and to age (Wass, 1991). Of relevance to this study are the stages prior to the phase of concrete operations.

The sensorimotor period, which extends from birth to approximately two years of age, is one in which object constancy develops and there is not yet knowledge of abstractions (Louw & Louw, 1995). The infant or very young toddler is then unable to differentiate between death and other causes for the unavailability of the loved one. Furman (1974) explains that the age-appropriate response to the loved person's continued absence would be the same at the time of the loss, irrespective of the cause. However, the effect on the eventual course and outcome of the mourning would differ if the loved one had actually died and this fact was grasped during subsequent development. Under optimal circumstances infants of about one year of age, whose loved one had died, would begin to understand this fact within the next twelve to eighteen months (Furman, 1974).

During the preoperational state, which covers roughly ages two through to seven, many skills necessary to
an understanding of death are still lacking (Wass, 1991). Although some cognitive and affective comprehension of death is displayed, preoperational children still have difficulty distinguishing between animate and inanimate objects. Egocentrism and magical thinking are characteristic of this stage (Botha, Van Ede & Piek, 1995). This is reflected through children during this stage believing that they have been instrumental in causing the death (Thompson & Payne, 2000), attributing feelings and thoughts to the deceased, and the expectation, through rituals, of the dead person's return (Buirski & Buirski, 1994).

Although a Piagetian based classification provides a framework of children's comprehension of death, levels of understanding within age groups do however differ (Weber & Fournier, 1985). When children above the age of two years have been helped to utilize encounters with the likes of dead birds or insects to comprehend the concept of death, the death of a loved one is easier to understand.

Limited cognitive understanding does not, however, preclude that young children do not feel and react to the death of a loved person with strong emotions and confusion. Norris-Shortle and Young (1993) point out that the younger the child, the more complicated and uncertain attempts at interpretation may become. For instance, while an infant may have no capacity to say a person's name when that person dies, the infant may
be acutely aware of, and overwhelmed by the surviving parents distress. Likewise, young children may readily perceive that something very serious has occurred and believe that their bad behaviour or thoughts have caused the unhappiness. This may then evolve into guilt and hostility. Concurring with this, Buirski and Buirski (1994) caution that it is in such instances, whereby children react in concrete and egocentric ways, or are unable to express what they are experiencing, that their grief is frequently misunderstood or denied.

2.4 REACTIONS OF CHILDREN TO THE DEATH OF A PARENT

Attempts to distinguish normative from pathological responses displayed by children, following parental death, remain fraught with confusion and uncertainty. This is largely due to the lack of systematic descriptions of how children's responses vary by their developmental status (Christ, 2001), the cyclical and repetitive nature of childhood bereavement (Huss, 1999), and that children's bereavement reactions, like symptoms, may be delayed (Buirski & Buirski, 1994).

Young children's preoccupation with their own security needs and their continuity of their daily routines may likely be reflected in response to a parent's death. They are more inclined to verbalize concerns about whether they can still attend a much-anticipated event, such as a party, than to respond
with immediate adult-like grief (Buirski & Buirski, 1994). However, of salience to Furman (1974) is that this death "...engenders a longing of incomparable amount, intensity, and longevity" (p. 16). The young child's life, Furman (1974) contends, will from then on be shadowed by the death of the parent.

Prior to age six, symptoms of mourning appear to be non-specific. These include temporary irritability, toileting regression, sleep disturbances, somatic symptoms and increased separation anxiety (Christ, 2001). Inner turmoil may also be expressed through regressed functioning in speech, as well as concentration and learning difficulties (Buirski & Buirski, 1994). Children are reported to be significantly more aggressive and delinquent (Downdey & Wilson, 1999), with the highest rate of reported difficulties to be found in boys (Downdey, 2000).

A considerable number of bereaved children develop the clinical picture of a major depressive episode immediately following the death of a parent, of which guilt and, or, worthlessness, and suicidal ideation are features (Weller, Weller, Fristad & Bowes, 1991). In the year following bereavement one child in five is likely to develop psychiatric disorder (Downdey, 2000).

As regards anxiety, Bowlby (1980) explains that it is hardly surprising that a child who has suffered one major loss should fear lest he suffers another. This
increases sensitivity to any separation from whoever may be parenting the child, or any remark or event suggestive of another loss. As a result, the child is prone to be anxious and clinging in situations that appear to an adult to be innocuous, and is more likely to seek comfort by resorting to some old comforting object that is more appropriate to an earlier age. Similar considerations apply to anger, as this event evokes extreme anger in some children, which may be expressed in indirect ways (Bowlby 1980).

Children who blame themselves for the loss, for one or other reason, are prone to self-reproach and depression. Suicidal ideation however, may be understood in the context of hopes of reunion with the dead parent. This commonly-held notion is particularly prominent when the irreversibility of death cannot be grasped. Alternatively, a bereaved child may develop a fear that he may also die, either through supposing that whatever caused the parent’s death might well cause his own too, or, because the parent died young, the same fate would likely apply (Bowlby, 1980).

Compulsive care-giving and compulsive self-reliance are not uncommon behaviours shown by bereaved children (Bowlby, 1980). A child may develop a pattern in which he becomes intensely concerned about the sadness of others and feels impelled to do all in his power to help and support them. In this way the
child’s sadness and yearning to be cared for can be suppressed. This suppression can also take the form of compulsive striving to be grown-up and independent, in the hope of meeting the expectations of the deceased (Bowlby, 1980). Children may also engage in restorative behaviour, such as behaving in a manner that distracts the parent so as to try and protect the distressed parent (Stokes, Pennington, Monroe, Papadatou & Relf, 1999).

For a young child a loss of self-esteem is a significant risk factor when a parent dies (Furman, 1974). This may also be exacerbated, in that, in losing a caregiver children claim to be “different” from their peers (Thompson & Payne, 2000) and feel stigmatised and isolated (Schilling & Koh, 1992). They may come to doubt the security of the lives of the people around them so that there is the steady emergence of undue concerns about being abandoned (Glass, 1991).

While some studies do fail to find a lack of significant changes in some bereaved children, both eight weeks after the death of a parent (Fristad, Jedel, Weller & Weller, 1993), and even after two years (Huss, 1999), this appears to be more a function of the cyclical nature of childhood bereavement, than a lack of impact (Huss 1999). It may well be that as younger children and children with unrealistic concepts grasp the permanency of their loss, symptoms may steadily increase over time.
This view is consistent with the continued appearance of behavioural symptoms observed in children in the fourth post-bereavement year, even though grief manifestations had diminished significantly earlier (Kaffman & Elizur, 1983).

In so far as emotional and behavioural responses are so diverse, clearly bereaved children use the resources available to their age and stage of development to maintain their equilibrium (Buirski & Buirski, 1994). For Bowlby (1980), there is nothing inherently pathological about children entertaining many of these fears, nor in responding in accordance with them. What makes for pathology is when these go unrecognised, or more seriously, when the circumstances that have exacerbated children’s fears are either suppressed, or disclaimed by the surviving parent "...for that is how an intelligible response becomes transformed into a mysterious symptom" (Bowlby, 1980, p. 351-2).

2.5 THE IMPACT IN LATER LIFE

It is argued that feelings, behaviour and understanding can change over time, dependent on factors such as the relationship to the deceased, the context of bereavement and access to support and resources (Stokes et al., 1999). The implication is that certain “risk” factors may not be sustained over time or may be precipitated by significant life events. For instance, a child may perform
appropriately at school, and seemingly adjusts well to bereavement, but may later experience difficulty, perhaps when starting a family.

Similarly, Sanders (1999) suggests that as the child gains more experience in later life, including the death and dying of others, difficulty in dealing with these issues could surface in the face of a current loss. This notion of the "sleeper" effect, in which disturbances or vulnerabilities re-surface in response to later stress, or loss, remains however largely untested (Downdey, 2000).

Berlinsky and Biller (1982) suggest that research pertaining to outcomes of early parent death has been guided by assumptions about the way in which bereaved children are likely to behave. Attempts to identify areas of convergence across studies find an association with early father death and later emotional disturbance, delinquency, criminal activity and deficits in cognitive-academic functioning. As compared to children from other family backgrounds, parentally bereaved children seem to be more submissive, dependent, introverted and less aggressive (Berlinksy & Biller, 1982). For Schilling and Koh (1992), the only areas of convergence include that young childhood is a period of great vulnerability, that the risk of childhood depression is higher for bereaved children, and that adult depression is associated with early childhood loss.
The preponderance of studies concerning emotional disturbance manifested when the bereaved child reaches adulthood pertain to depression and suicide (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982). Finkelstein (1988) argues for a strong association between early mother death and severe forms of depression, while the relationship of early parent death with alcoholism and other forms of depression is suggested. Within the general population, milder effects, including adaptive compensatory efforts are alluded to. In sharp contrast, Barnes and Prosen (1985) suggest the most significant association to be between father loss and depression, particularly prior to the child reaching age six. Although a higher incidence of suicidal behaviour among adult psychiatric inpatients who have experienced loss of a parent has been shown (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982), the same has not been the case in a non-psychiatric population (Rainieri & Lester, 1997). Finding no confirmation for the later behaviour disorder hypothesis, Hurd (1999) argues against depression as an inevitable outcome of childhood bereavement. However of equal importance is that clearly, years after a childhood bereavement experience, some adults do still suffer emotionally, in some or other manner, as a result (Hurd, 1999).

Within a non-psychiatric population, support for early parent loss as a powerful pathogenic influence is evidenced through abnormally elevated MMPI scores. Sklar and Harris (1985) believe this to reflect different manifestations of anxiety: directly, by
fearfulness; behaviourally, by hyperactivity or impulsivity; or indirectly by defences such as somatization, withdrawal and passivity. It is argued that heightened anxiety may be triggered by parent loss in childhood, which may then sensitise the child to anxiety through adulthood (Furukawa, Mizukawa, Hirai, Fujihara, Kitamura & Takahashi, 1998). However the defences may contribute to incomplete mourning with consequent feelings of guilt, emptiness, personal ineffectiveness and suppressed anger, and thereby increased depression (Sklar & Harris, 1985). Dietrich (1984) concludes that amongst those functioning in general society, 50% of individuals who had lost a parent by death during childhood tend to be characterized by a serious disturbance in their psychological health. Males, prior to age seven, seem to be most susceptible to this loss, which Dietrich (1984) attributes to the different developmental requirements for boys and girls. In contrast, Berlinsky and Biller (1982) purport that children under seven, of both sexes, are particularly vulnerable.

A common theme to early parent loss centres on changes in roles and responsibilities in the family. For instance, a child may assume a confidant role with the mother, and an older son may be asked to carry out the role of man in the home. Maintaining generational boundaries may be difficult (Gass-Sternas, 1995). In a related vein, it is argued that when personal identity is strongly connected to the
deceased, it necessitates restructuring of a new identity. This too would likely demand the relinquishing of previously-held roles (Sanders, 1999). Changes may also take the form of interference with the educational process, which then sets in place a lifelong barrier to greater financial security. The resulting economic problems may in turn exert an especially deleterious influence on perceptions of personal control (Krause, 1993). This loss is also thought to evoke the tendency to have a less satisfactory adjustment to stressors as adults, which then acts to compromise physical health in later life (Krause, 1998).

Early parental bereavement could however be construed as an event that acts as an impetus for an individual to assume greater responsibilities and challenges. For instance, Finkelstein (1988) cites the study by Eisenstadt (1978), in which early father death has occurred more frequently amongst prominent individuals listed in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. In perceiving the death as a response to one's value as a person, and thereby as a blow to self-esteem, this may predispose the individual toward accomplishments which serve to alleviate fears about one's worthiness. Alternatively, idealization of the deceased parent may lead to inordinate strivings in an effort to meet the standard that the deceased parent is felt to represent (Finkelstein, 1988). In a similar manner, instead of the disruption of the parent-child bond leading to future impairments in
the individual's capacity to develop relationships, the loss may paradoxically prompt socialization (Furukawa, Yokouchi, Hirai, Kitamura & Takahashi, 1999).

These variations in outcome of early parent loss demonstrate that the effects upon the adult are both disparate and not specific. Adding further to this lack of clarity is that no longitudinal studies of children have been conducted (Black, 1996) and that studies amongst those who are functioning in general society are limited (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982; Finkelstein, 1988).

2.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to illuminate the processes that transpire following the death of a parent in the pre-school years. Despite contention over whether children undergo a mourning process, very young children do indeed appear to hurt and grieve. While chronological and cognitive factors do play a role in this process, to attribute to these factors alone whether mourning follows a healthy or pathological course, is to ignore the complexities of this experience. Nevertheless, the behaviours demonstrated subsequent to the loss of a parent point to the magnitude of this trauma in the young child's life.
Overall, the literature demonstrates the disparity of this experience as it acts upon the adult throughout life. It would seem that the feelings that this loss gives rise to are channelled in very diverse ways. Perhaps then, this is not necessarily the "lifelong burden" posited by Furman (1974), but neither could it be expected not to imprint on the individual's life in some manner. Possibly, at different times and under certain circumstances, there may be a longing for the perceived role which that parent might be presumed to have played. In that case, even though the early trauma has been resolved, the child's life may be forever "shadowed" by the deceased parent. This begs the question then, as to what it is like to experience such a loss in the early years of one's life.
CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF THE FATHER

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Along with adults, bereaved children need to find an appropriate place for the dead person in the context of their ongoing lives. This involves an ongoing meaning-making process as to working out "why" their parent has died and "what role" this person would now have in their lives (Stokes et al., 1999).

Because mothers and fathers tend to play qualitatively different roles (Lamb, 1976) and in so doing, fulfil different needs in the lives of their children, their deaths could not be expected to exert identical outcomes (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982). For the purposes of this study, the father's role and its influence, is elucidated.

3.2 PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT AND ITS INFLUENCE

Indicative of the tendency in prior decades, in which the predominant focus was upon infant-mother attachment, fathers were described as "the forgotten contributors to child development" (Lamb, 1975, p. 245), or viewed as "the hidden parent" (Ortiz, 2000, p. 12). Although mother-child research continues to overshadow that of fathers and children (Halle, Moore, Greene & Le Menestrel, 1998) the scepticism as
to the significance of father-child relationships no longer prevails. Substantial consensus now exists that father-child relationships can be remarkably influential (Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000).

Unlike the role of the mother, which is rarely brought into question, the changing conceptions of "fatherhood" over time indicate this to be a historically unstable concept (Griswold, 1998), and fundamentally to be linked to cultural prescription (Marsiglio et al., 2000). During different periods of time the dominant roles that have been ascribed to fathers include the father as moral teacher, breadwinner, sex-role model, and subsequently, the nurturing father (Lamb, 1986). Fathers do, however, fill many roles, of which the relative importance of each varies from one context to another, thereby affecting their children's development in many ways, other than through direct interaction (Lamb, 1986).

Popenoe (1998) argues for the differing complementary contributions of mothers and fathers in order to meet the dual needs of children. Seemingly, this entails an integration of two human desires, namely for communion, which implicates connectedness and relatedness, and for agency, which implicates independence and individuality. In a related vein, Gutmann (1998) believes that children must be given some assurance of both physical and emotional security and that the same parent cannot provide both kinds. He explains that despite differences in child
rearing in societies, in order to thrive "...the vulnerable child must be assured of two kinds of parental nurturance" (p. 2).

In relation to their infants, mothers and fathers do assume different roles (Lamb, 1976). Whereas father's care-giving tends to increase with children's age, social interaction tends to be the more typical form of paternal involvement during children's pre-school years. This involvement does not seem to diminish over time, nor differ according to the childrens' sex (Bailey, 1994).

The largest percentage of fathers of pre-schoolers, play with their children every day (Marsiglio, 1991). Furthermore, infants demonstrate a more positive response to play with fathers than with mothers, which Lamb (1976) attributes to the more idiosyncratic and rough-and-tumble types of play in which fathers engage. Although mothers hold their infants far more than do fathers, this is usually for the purposes of caretaking or controlling of infants activities (Lamb, 1976). Popenoe (1998) contends that the unusual significance of the father's play is its likelihood of physical stimulation and excitement, which potentially facilitates more physical and mental testing of skills. In so doing, this resembles a form of teaching relationship.

High paternal involvement may be related to children's cognitive growth at one year of age.
(Nugent, 1991). Similarly, significantly better academic performance by children is associated with father involvement, regardless of the activity that father and child share (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996). Despite being considered as the exclusive domain of mothers, fathers do participate in early literacy skill building with their young children, which may have more of a learning impact than formal instruction within the classroom (Ortiz, 2000).

The father's role as teacher is not however confined to the arenas of reading and writing. Bright and Williams (1996) identify recurring themes amongst fathers to include imparting a strong sense of responsibility, positive self-and ethnic identity, self-discipline, and the value of perseverance and effort. Similarly, Popenoe (1998) believes that unlike mothers, who tend to stress emotional security and personal safety, fathers tend to stress competition, challenge, initiative, risk-taking and independence. In using the playground as an example of this differential interaction Popenoe (1998) states:

"...fathers will try to get the child to swing even higher, higher than the person on the next swing, while mothers will be cautious, worrying about accidents" (p. 40).

The provision of economic support is one way in which fathers contribute to their children's well-being.
Marsiglio et al. (2000) argue that because women earn less than men, and are less likely to be employed full-time, fathers largely determine children's economic status. Furthermore, for many men, particularly those in the working class, working hard to provide for their families is the primary means of expressing interest in their children's lives (Doherty, 1991). In noting the harmful toll induced by economic hardship on children to include poor nutrition, health problems, low school grades, school dropout, emotional distress and behavioural difficulties, Marsiglio et al. (2000) point to the potential ramifications of father loss.

The time-honoured role of protector and guide seems to be a salient concern amongst fathers (Anderson, 1996). Activities that reflect this may range from accompanying children wherever possible, to earnest attempts to monitor media exposure (Bright & Williams, 1996). This may also take the form of maintaining discipline, which, it is argued, may account for the greater behavioural problems exhibited by children who lack a father (Popenoe, 1998). Although lack of supervision and control on children could be a consequence of all types of single-parent families (Thomson, McLanahan & Curtin, 1992), father absence seems to exacerbate the negative impact of peer problem behaviour (Mason, Cauce, Gonzales & Hiraga, 1994), and it is not merely the presence of an additional adult that acts as a deterrent for misbehaviour (Steinberg, 1987).
Fathers seem to have distinct influences on the development of their sons and daughters. For sons, father involvement may be most relevant in avoiding problem behaviours, whereas for daughters it may be more integral in preventing psychological distress (Salem, Zimmerman & Notaro, 1998). Thompson (1986) believes that fathers are more intimately involved with their sons than with their daughters, and so have a more profound influence on their son's development. Consistent with this, boys reared without their fathers appear to be substantially disadvantaged (Pillay, 1987). Also, in the absence of a father, boys who do have male substitutes demonstrate improvements in relations with teachers, home life interactions, peer relations and self-concept, as compared to those without significant adult male involvement (Nelson & Valliant, 1993). In terms of the impact on the development of gender, no significant differences are apparent as a function of father presence (Hardesty & Wenk, 1995). With respect to gender role, the characteristics of the father as a parent, rather than the characteristics of the father as a man, may be more influential (Lamb, 1986).

Fathers influence their children's social adjustment and peer acceptance, and this extends into adolescence (Paley, Conger & Harold, 2000). Their warmth towards their children in the pre-school years is associated with the marital success and social networks of their children when their offspring reach
middle adulthood (Franz, McClelland & Weinberger, 1991). Their benefit to children's development seems to be by supporting positive outcomes and buffering children from negative outcomes (Halle, et al., 1998).

Across racial or ethnic backgrounds, father's attitudes and behaviours toward their children show more similarities than differences. When differences do occur, they occur more between fathers who differ in socio-economic status (Halle et al., 1998). For example, Fox and Solis-Camara (1997) report more frequent use of corporal and verbal discipline strategies amongst lower socio-economic status fathers as compared to their higher socio-economic status counterparts. Nevertheless, the developmental expectations, discipline and nurturing of fathers appears to be more culturally universal than culturally specific.

3.3 CONCLUSION

Whatever the extent of their involvement, fathers do appear to influence their children's development by means of their interaction, and by virtue of their impact on the family's social and emotional climate (Lamb, 1986). Given that fathers typically assume the roles of provider, protector, caregiver and teacher, amongst many others, there can be little doubt as to their psychological value in children's development. For the child who has lost a father in
the pre-school years the father may have been well known and loved, or even hardly known. In either instance, it could be expected that he would be perceived to have fulfilled these roles, and in this way, he may accompany the child throughout life.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH APPROACH

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Every research method carries with it an approach. Whether it is explicit or implicit, the approach defines the content of the research by virtue of the nature of the question it poses (Kruger, 1979). The implication is that the method and the content of the research is inextricably linked to the approach. This chapter will discuss qualitative research in general, followed by an explanation of how phenomenology informs this study and the method used.

4.2 THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PARADIGM

The qualitative paradigm stems from an antipositivistic, interpretive approach. Although it is a multiperspective approach, in that it makes use of different qualitative techniques and data collection methods, it can be understood as an approach that concentrates on the qualities, as against the measurable aspects, of human behaviour. It is idiographic, and so holistic in nature (Schurink, 1998).

The main aim of qualitative research is to understand and interpret meaning that people give to their everyday lives (Schurink, 1998). This runs counter
to the positivist assumption that we all "...experience the world in the same way" (Neuman, 1997, p 70). Schurink (1998) explains that the qualitative researcher discards the notion of an objective reality, which can be explained, controlled and predicted by causal laws, with the same cause having the same effect on all people. Rather, behaviour is considered to be intentional and creative. Consistent with this, the researcher can explain, but not predict behaviour.

The researcher who engages in qualitative research is involved with those being studied (Neuman, 1997). Subjects are consulted as to what would constitute meaningful and relevant research questions, and whether the interpretations and conclusions truly reflect their experience, or are valid for the setting studied (Hoshmand, 1989). By virtue of this interaction, the qualitative researcher is subjective (Schurink, 1998). Not only is this considered to be an egalitarian stance on the part of the researcher, it is also viewed as a non-exploitative relationship with the human subject (Hoshmand, 1989).

During this process of interaction between the researcher and the subject, the subject’s world is discovered by methods that are dialectical and interpretative (Schurink, 1998). The implication is that the research does not follow a step-by-step plan. Rather, this is a process, according to
Hoshmand (1989), that is "... supposed to be organic and emergent, allowing for discovery, unplanned backlooping and decisions to change course" (P. 14). This process then, does not engage in controlled measurement, nor assume replication.

Polkinghorne (1989) explains that from the qualitative perspective, human reality is seen as closely related to natural language. For this reason qualitative research involves a commitment to natural language descriptions, rather than measurement, for its data and its results. Similarly, it is argued that meaning does not lend itself to reductive analysis (Stones, 1986). On the contrary, meaning and significance are considered to be distorted when the context is ignored.

It can be seen then, that in its broadest sense, the qualitative research paradigm is more than a category of research designs. It is concerned with the understanding of other people's reality, which it contends can be explored from the perspective of an insider (Schurink, 1998). By rendering descriptive data, that is, in the subject's own words, this paradigm holds that meaning is derived from the subject's perspective.

4.3 RESEARCH FROM A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

A qualitative approach is consistent with a phenomenological approach, which is the theoretical
perspective that informs this study. Although phenomenological research is identified with other descriptive and qualitative approaches, it is distinguished from them by its focus on the structures of consciousness as a special realm of inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Merleau-Ponty (1945) describes phenomenology as both the study of essences, and as a philosophy, which puts essences back into existence. All it's efforts, he states:

"... are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world ... " (p. vii).

According to Moustakas (1994), as a transcendental science, phenomenology emerged out of a growing discontent with a philosophy of science based exclusively on studies of material things. Cartesian philosophy, by separating the unobservable mind from the observable, and so accessible, body, introduced a philosophical dualism in which man has a twofold reality. In Cartesian terms then, man is an intellectual being distanced from his body and the world, and science is only possible in so far as man keeps himself out of his observations (Kruger, 1979). This philosophy of science neglected to take into account the experiencing person and the connections between human consciousness and the objects that exist in the material world (Moustakas, 1994).
Phenomenology offers an approach toward resolution of this dilemma.

From the phenomenological point of view objects have their basis in, and are sustained by the constituting power of consciousness. Consciousness is recognized as an activity that is complex and constantly changing, which does not exist in and of itself. Rather, it always has an object, so that it is characterized by intentionality (Valle, King & Halling, 1989).

The implication is that the object that appears in consciousness mingles with the object in nature to create meaning. It is this blending of that which is really present, with what is imagined as present, from the vantage point of possible meanings, that acts to construct each person's unique interpretation of the world (Moustakas, 1994). This relationship is clarified by Merleau-Ponty (1945) who states that "... there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (p. xi). In this sense, experience, as it is directly given, occurs at the meeting of the person and the world (Polkinghorne, 1989).

As a pioneer into this realm, philosopher Edmund Husserl's concern was with the world as given in direct and immediate experience (Valle, King & Halling, 1989). Husserl's first directive to phenomenology was to allow a phenomenon to speak for
itself (Kruger, 1979). He advocated the setting aside of preconceptions and presuppositions so as to reach a transcendental state of freshness and openness. This entails abstaining from the belief that the world exists independently of the person. This process, in which one moves from the natural attitude toward a transcendental attitude, is known as "bracketing" or the "phenomenological reduction" (Valle, King & Halling, 1989). Moustakas (1994) describes this attitude as: "... a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience" (p. 41). In assuming this attitude then, one is able to arrive at an unprejudiced description of the essence of the phenomena.

For Husserl, phenomenology thus meant the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear, without taking into account psychological origin, nor providing causal explanation (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Its focus is a return to things, just as they are given, removed from everyday biases, from what we are told is true in nature and in the natural world of everyday living. In this way, phenomenology as a philosophy is concerned with providing descriptions of the general characteristics of experience, with a particular focus by existentialists on the experience of being human (Polkinghorne, 1989). When applied more specifically to human psychological phenomena,
existential phenomenology becomes existential-phenomenological psychology. This complementary approach to the study of man is a psychological discipline that seeks to explicate the essence, structure or form of human experience and behaviour through the use of descriptive research techniques (Valle, King & Halling, 1989). Not only does this avoid Cartesian dualism, it allows for a deep and full understanding of human existence.

4.4 APPLICATION TO RESEARCH

Phenomenological research considers the uniquely human characteristics of man to be legitimate subject matter for a psychology conceived of as a human science (Kruger, 1979). From this perspective the reality of the realm of meaningful experience is acknowledged to be the fundamental locus of knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1989). In this sense, by focusing exclusively on participant's experience, instead of their overt actions, this provides access to all that can be directly known (Polkinghorne, 1989).

It follows then, that the purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to provide clear and accurate descriptions of a particular aspect of human experience. This demands that the researcher attends to what is present or given in awareness, with the emphasis on participant's descriptions and not on researcher's reports (Polkinghorne, 1989). Giorgi (1997) explains that it is these "... presences that carry the index of
reality with them ..." and which are " ... vital for proper understanding of human phenomena ..." (p. 235). By attending only to consciousness, the distraction of needing to look outside of awareness for the cause of the experience is removed (Polkinghorne, 1989). The essential point here is that the researcher concentrates on, and describes what is actually given, without prejudging the phenomena, nor viewing it through any pre-given perspective, based on previous knowledge. The concern is with "what" is given, rather than "why" it is given (Kruger, 1979). The aim is to explicate the essential meanings of subject’s perspectives on their worlds. It attempts to get beyond immediately experienced meanings in order to articulate the pre-reflective level of lived meanings (Kvale, 1996). Essentially data on consciousness can be co-constituted only by reciprocal implication with the researcher in dialogue with the subject (Hoshrnand, 1989).

4.5 CONCLUSION

Phenomenologists thus argue that to study man as an experiential being, the researcher avoids an approach in which the human elements disappear (Kruger, 1979). Based upon the premise that all knowledge is ultimately grounded in human experience, the focus of the research is on participant’s experience. The goal of understanding and interpreting the meaning that people give to their everyday lives is accomplished when the researcher enters the subject’s
life world. This is achieved through analysing the conversations and interaction between the researcher and subjects. Kruger (1979) sums up phenomenologically informed research when he states:

"... more properly it is an attitude but not that of a technician with his bag of tools and methods ready to repair a poorly functioning machine. Rather it is one of wonder and respect as one attempts a dialogue with the world - to get the world to disclose itself to one in all it's manifestness and complexity" (p. 113).
CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In phenomenologically-oriented research, the method used develops "... in a dialogue with the phenomenon to be explored" (Kruger, 1979, p. 139). That is, methods function essentially as guidelines, so that the researcher is expected to develop a plan of study suited to understanding the particular experience under investigation.

For the purposes of this discussion the terms "subjects" and "participants" will be used interchangeably in referring to those who share their experience with the researcher. These terms however do not imply that those who participate in this study are regarded as experimental objects for the use of the researcher. Rather, the implication is that subjects act as co-researchers, or research collaborators, through opening up their subjective experiences to the researcher.

5.2 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

A researcher who uses a phenomenological approach interacts in a personal manner with those who share their experience, with the working relationship being one of collaboration (Hoshmand, 1989). As a result,
the researcher cannot be viewed as an independent observer, but must be seen as a participant observer (Stones, 1986). As a participant observer, the researcher registers and interprets what is reported, as well as how it is reported. This process is akin to counselling inquiry, in that ambiguous meanings are clarified, which allows for the possibility that the participant may discover new aspects of that which is being described (Hoshmand, 1989). It is also incumbent upon the researcher to create a situation in which the subject can feel relaxed and unthreatened (Kruger, 1979).

5.3 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study will be chosen in terms of their suitability for addressing the aim of this investigation, which is to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of the death of a father in the pre-school years. Subjects will be selected on the basis that they are able to function as "informants" for the topic under investigation (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 47). The essential criteria include that a participant has experienced the death of a father prior to beginning school, and has the capacity to provide full and sensitive descriptions of this experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). Subjects should also be willing to communicate their thoughts, feelings and perceptions in an open manner (Stones, 1986).
The logic of subject selection in phenomenological research differs from the logic of statistical sampling theory, whereby subjects are chosen randomly in order to make inferences from a sample to a population (Polkinghorne, 1989). Rather, this study will use purposive sampling (Neuman, 1997) by seeking out those who have experienced the phenomena under investigation. This is consistent with the phenomenological concern, which is to describe the structure of an experience, rather than the characteristics of a group who have had the experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). As this topic is limited to a specific group, the participants in this study will be accessed by word of mouth. In other words, the researcher will make it known amongst colleagues, friends and students that participants that meet the above criteria are being sought.

5.4 NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The number of participants selected for phenomenological research varies considerably (Polkinghorne, 1989). It is argued that in using only one subject certain aspects of the experience may be omitted (Kruger, 1979). Stones (1986) suggests that the use of several subjects provides greater variability, and so facilitates a greater fluency with the phenomenon. This study will engage three participants to generate data on the experience of losing a father in the pre-school years.
5.5 PROCEDURE

5.5.1 Data Generation

Raw data for this study will be derived through dialogues between the researcher and participants, and will constitute the precise wording used throughout the interviews. The duration of each interview will be determined by each of the participants, based on whether all that can be described of their experience has been explicated. This of course may vary with each participant. The arrangements made for the interviews will be those that best accommodate the participants, with regard to their feeling comfortable and giving their full attention to sharing the details of their experience.

Each participant will be informed of the nature and purpose of the study and be encouraged to become a research participant on equal footing with the researcher. Once a mutual agreement is reached, permission to use the interviews for research purposes will be acquired in writing. Participants will be assured of anonymity and confidentiality both in terms of the information given, and with regard to access of the data. Should any participant require immediate therapeutic support, or referral for psychotherapeutic help, this will be attended to. Each interview will be recorded and then converted to written form.
Data will be generated through the technique of qualitative interviewing, which in essence will take the form of a discourse or conversation, involving personal engagement (Polkinghorne, 1989). Not only does the open-ended interview allow for flexibility (Kruger, 1979), it also provides participants with sufficient opportunity to express their viewpoints extensively (Giorgi, 1997). The researcher will remain disciplined in focussing on the research question, to ensure that subjects avoid lapsing into theoretical or interpretative descriptions of the experience. The way in which the researcher will frame the questions will encourage subjects to report their experiences rather than give worldly depictions (Polkinghorne, 1989). This will be done by asking them questions such as “What did you experience?” or “What is it like for you?” instead of “What happened”.

It will be suggested to participants to take a few moments to focus on the experience, moments of particular awareness and impact, and then to describe their experience of losing a father in the pre-school years. In failing to understand a particular point made by any subject, the researcher will seek clarification. All effort will be made to avoid any questions that could be construed as leading the subject. The essential factor within these interviews is that data will be generated that will capture the participant’s direct experience, based on what is present in the participant’s consciousness.
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when this experience is attended to (Polkinghorne, 1989).

The researcher considers that these broad questions will serve as a general interview guide to facilitate the obtaining of rich and substantive descriptions of the participants experience:

Could you describe, in detail, your personal experience of your father's death?  
What was your concept of death at the time?  
How did the experience affect you?  
What dimensions, incidents and people intimately connected with the experience stand out for you?  
What has been the impact of this on your life?  
What feelings were generated by this experience?  
What thoughts about this stand out for you?  
In what way has this experience been relevant to other events in your life?  
What role do you see your father as having played in your life?

5.5.2 Data Analysis

Since phenomenological inquiry aims to derive a description of the essential features of the investigated experience from raw protocols (Polkinghorne, 1989), the transcribed data are subjected to rigorous analysis. The following steps in analysis will be taken by this researcher, in order to arrive at themes or common elements, that
would enhance our understanding of the experience of losing one's father in the pre-school years.

5.5.3 Grasping The Data

In keeping with the holistic approach of phenomenology, prior to analysis, the protocols will be read as a whole to attain a global and intuitive sense of the data. In this initial reading, the researcher will remain mindful to bracket her personal preconceptions and judgements, so as to the extent possible, to "remain faithful to the data" (Stones, 1986, p. 119). The protocols will then be re-read, if necessary repeatedly, with a more reflective attitude. This refers to reading in a manner of preparation for the subsequent phases, in which a more particular and exacting analysis is required (Kruger, 1979).

5.5.4 Division Of Transcripts Into Units

Once the researcher has grasped a wholeness of the data, and it can be retained, the transcript will be divided into units that seem to express a self-contained meaning from a psychological perspective. Drawing on professional sensitivity and spontaneity will facilitate the formulation of meaning units so that any unexpected meanings can emerge. This is known as "intuiting" (Giorgi, 1997).
In a slower rereading of the description, a transition in subject matter can assist the researcher in identifying and delineating meaning units (Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, each time the researcher perceives a change in subject matter, it will be marked on the transcript until all meaning units are discriminated. Care will be taken not to theorize, but to treat the text as a naive presentation of the subject’s experience. The end result of this process will culminate in a series of meaning units, still expressed in the subject’s own everyday language, which reflects the participant’s experience, and not that of the researcher.

5.5.5 The Transformation Of The Units Into Meaning Units

Having delineated the natural meaning units, the raw data will be transformed into psychological and phenomenological concepts. That is, "the meaning that dominates the natural unit will be stated as simply as possible in the researchers own language, and so made explicit. Stones (1986) explains that even though the subjects phraseology should, wherever possible, be adhered to in order that the data may:

"speak for itself, ... since the shared nature of our lived-world suggests that we are able to understand each other’s meanings, it is permissible for the researcher to articulate the central themes in words
other than those used by the subjects in order to convey the intended meaning clearly" (p. 119).

This move from the raw data to the meaning hidden in it, will require of the researcher a rigorous reflection in ensuring that the connections with the original data are not severed. Any units, which are very obviously irrelevant to the phenomenon being studied, will be eliminated, as will overlapping and repetitive statements. The result will be a list of meaning, or rather, significant statements, reflecting the essential point of each original statement.

5.5.6 Formulating A Hypothetical And General Description Of The Experience

The meaning units will then be tied together to produce a further reduction into general themes that are common to all the subjects protocols. That is, in reading through the re-described meanings, relationships and patterns between the meaning units will be formulated, to arrive at a general and hypothetical description of the experience. The identification of these essential psychological elements will depend upon the researchers intuition and judgement. Stones (1986) cautions that even themes, which may look to the researcher to be discrepant or contradictory, cannot be ignored, in that it is precisely at this stage that the phenomenological assumption comes to the fore. In
other words, that which is logically inexplicable is to be regarded as existentially real and valid. The resultant proposed formulation would then be compared to the transformed meanings again to see if it supported. This procedure may have to be carried out several times, with the description undergoing changes, until the meanings clearly support the final general description. This process will allow for the emergence of a "general structural description" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 51) that accurately reflects the participants' experience of losing a father in the pre-school years; namely, the findings of the research.

The researcher will then return to each subject to consult as to how these descriptive results compare with the subject's experience, or, whether any aspects of the subject's experience have been omitted. Should any relevant new data emerge, this will be worked into a revised, final description.

5.6 VALIDITY IN THIS STUDY

Phenomenological research responds to the criteria of validity in a different manner from quantitative research (Giorgi, 1997). In quantitative research the concept of validity is specifically related to confidence in the measuring instruments. Phenomenological research however looks at whether the conclusion inspires confidence because the
argument in support of it has been persuasive (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Accounting for the researchers intentions and overall presence is one of the ways by which phenomenological researchers address the problem of validity (Hoshmand, 1989). In having made explicit the researchers worldview, method of access and interpretation, and by presenting samples of the data for review, the reader is able to follow the thought processes that have led to the conclusion. Validity would depend then, on the accuracy with which the raw data have been transformed into psychological meanings, and the synthesis of these into a general structural description (Polkinghorne, 1989). When differences of wording are inter-subjectively understood to reflect an identical meaning, or similar themes (Stones, 1986) to those, which have emerged from the data, as explicated by this researcher, validity is indicated. With regard to internal validity, the follow up interviews with the subjects allows for the verification of the subject’s realities and meanings.

Polkinghorne (1989) explains that not all arguments persuade with the same power. Arguments may progress from “sound”, to “convincing”, to “conclusive” (p. 51). On this basis, the degree of the validity of the findings of phenomenological research depends on the power of its presentation to convince the reader that its findings are accurate.
5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the methodology to be used in this study. Included in this are the methods and procedures that have been developed in preparing to conduct the study, in collecting the data, and in organizing and analysing the data. The criterion of validity as it relates to this method is addressed.
CHAPTER SIX

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the results of a phenomenological inquiry through the use of phenomenological methods of research. These methods are used to access accurate and clear descriptions of a particular aspect of participants’ conscious experiences. Purposive sampling is used through selecting subjects who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. The use of several subjects facilitates a greater fluency with the phenomenon. Data is generated through the technique of qualitative interviewing. These transcribed accounts of participants’ personal experience are then subjected to rigorous analysis in order to articulate the pre-reflective level of lived meaning.

6.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Three participants were involved in this study. Each was approached to engage in dialogue with the researcher about their experience of the death of their fathers. Consistent with this study, each subject had undergone this experience in the preschool years. The precise wording used by the participants to describe their experience constituted the raw data. The three participants had one
interview each, of which the duration was approximately forty-five minutes for one, and sixty minutes for two. Following the interviews, the raw data was transcribed and divided into units, which were then transformed into meaning units. The meaning units were then tied together with themes being identified. This process resulted in a general structural description, which reflects the participants' experience of losing a father in the pre-school years.

6.3 BACKGROUND OF PARTICIPANTS

In order to preserve the anonymity of participants all names have been changed.

Martha was three years old when her father died. She was the last born in a family that constituted five other siblings. Martha and her family shared a house in Alexandra with her two aunts and their families. Her father was a teacher by profession, who was driven by financial circumstances to seek work at the mines in Carltonville. There he succumbed to cancer, and died in the mine hospital. Martha is now 41 years of age.

Eve's father died in a car accident. The eldest of three children, Eve and her siblings lived in a suburban home in Gauteng. Her father was a medical doctor who was driving with a patient to the hospital at the time of the accident. Eve was five years old
coming up to six, when the accident occurred, and is now aged 45.

Ken was four years old when his father, with little warning, became sick and died of cancer. He and his two older brothers shared their home with Ken's grandparents in Gauteng. Following the death of his father, Ken and his family had to move home. His eldest brother was then sent to boarding school, followed by Ken and his other sibling. Ken is currently 35 years old.

6.4 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis of the transcripts of the three participants' experience of losing a father in the pre-school years has resulted in the derivation of eight core themes. These core themes and their sub-themes are presented in the following discussion of results.

6.4.1: The Developmental Phase: The Pre-School Years

The death of a parent when a child is in the pre-school years presents particular demands as a consequence of this developmental phase. Furman (1974) argues that for a young child, a loss of this magnitude not only brings with it an excess of helplessness, but that the child lacks the mental resources required to meet such demands. This core theme incorporates the sub-themes of a: Death as an
abstract concept, b: Concrete reactions and c: Perceiving the world as unsafe.

6.4.1.a: Death as an abstract concept

The three participants in this study have provided the following perceptions of death, as it is understood in the pre-school years:

"I, at 4, didn't know what death was, yet when I think about it I knew that he wasn't coming back... I wished that he would come back, but in the bottom of my heart, I knew it was final"

"you know at 3 yrs. old, for me, it's as if I wasn't there - that kind of stuff .. I remember absolutely nothing"

"I was nearly 6 and I did not really understand much about death at all when he died, death was so black, so scary"

The above data indicates the difficulty with which the pre-school child is faced when confronted with the abstract concept of "death". This suggests that although a child might perhaps grasp a particular component of the concept of death, for example, irreversibility, many skills necessary to an understanding of death are, prior to the phase of concrete operations, still lacking (Wass, 1991).
6.4.1.b: Concrete reactions

Two of the three participants recall their immediate reactions to the news of the death of their fathers:

"everybody was crying except for me, ... I started making jokes about it, I said "God put down a looong step ladder, down to earth for him to walk up"

"I was screaming, "no, no, bring my Daddy back"

The immediate reactions of a pre-school child to the death of a father may not necessarily reflect that which the child undergoes emotionally. As portrayed by the foregoing data they are unlikely to respond with immediate adult-like grief (Buirski & Buirski, 1994). Being a phase in which children likely lack the ability to express what they are experiencing and that reactions may be concrete and egocentric, their grief may, erroneously be denied, or misunderstood (Buirski & Buirski, 1994).

6.4.1.c: Perceiving the world as unsafe

Of the three participants, two perceived the world to have altered as a consequence of the death of their fathers:

"the world became a dangerous unsafe place, there was an atmosphere of real terror"
"I can simply say that the world had overnight changed into a scary, crazy place, things weren’t safe and I definitely was not"

"I can always remember feeling different after that day, I was always feeling afraid"

Attesting to the argument by Norris-Shortle and Young (1993), the data indicates that when a loved person dies young children may readily perceive that something very serious has occurred. It would seem then, that limited cognitive understanding does not preclude that young children do not feel and react to the death of a loved person with strong emotions and confusion. Furthermore, while the literature is suggestive of particular fears such as that of another loss, or of death (Bowlby, 1980), this is distinct from an immediate diffuse fear and lack of safety as suggested by the above data.

6.4.2 Conditions Pertaining To The Loss

Bowlby (1980) argues that for young children who lose a parent, the conditions that precede, surround and follow the loss, are of significant influence. For Bowlby (1980), children’s greater vulnerability to the impact of bereavement lies in the relationship with the deceased, the information provided to the child, participation in family grieving and a comforting presence of a surviving parent or trusted substitute. This core theme includes the sub-themes
of a: Lack of information and b: Lack of participation in family grieving.

6.4.2.a: Lack of information

The three participants provided the following insights into their families' manner of dealing with the loss:

"I do not recall my family ever discussing my father, it was something that was not mentioned"

"I became upset if anybody would talk about death or my father, so they knew not to"

"until then (1992) no-one spoke about it, it was like how come you didn't really talk about him?"

This data points to the lack of information provided to the bereaved children in this study. Bowlby (1980) identifies the information provided to the child to be a condition that influences the course of mourning. Should the information provided to the child be positive, the more likely healthy mourning can transpire (Bowlby, 1980).

6.4.2.b: Lack of participation in family grieving

All three participants reflected on their involvement in the family grieving:
"for most of my life I have left my father at this mysterious gravesite where I was not allowed"

"I think I was about sixteen when I first visited his grave"

"my family made sure I didn’t go through that"

As with the information provided to the bereaved child, an additional factor that Bowlby (1980) regards as influential in young children’s mourning, is the participation in family grieving. The above data demonstrates that the bereaved children in this study were not involved in the family grieving. Positive participation in family grieving may enhance the likelihood of healthy mourning (Bowlby, 1980).

6.4.3: Subsequent Reactions To The Bereavement

Having experienced bereavement of a father in the pre-school years, the developing child may manifest various emotional and behavioural responses to the earlier loss. Bowlby (1980) believes that there is nothing inherently pathological in such responses, but cautions that should these go unrecognised, or more seriously when the circumstances that have exacerbated children’s fears are either suppressed, or disclaimed, these responses may be transformed into pathology. The sub-themes incorporated in this core theme include a: Efforts to alleviate others’
pain, b: Defence mechanisms and c: Assuming adult roles and responsibilities.

6.4.3. a: Efforts to alleviate others' pain

Two of the three participants expressed behavioural changes in response to what others were experiencing:

"I wanted just to relieve my mothers' struggling, so I would try to be the model child"

"doing the right things meant a happier mother and a safer me"

"I needed to ensure that the important people around me were satisfied and pleased"

"my mission was to tread lightly, not to trouble too much"

"if I was a good girl I would not have bad things happen to anyone"

"I was always trying to make everything O.K."

From the foregoing data, it can be seen that young children may feel impelled to do all in their power to help and support others who are in distress as a result of the loss (Bowlby, 1980). This may then give rise to restorative patterns of behaviour, that
is, behaviours that attempt to protect the distressed parent (Stokes et al., 1999).

6.4.3.b: Defence mechanisms

Of the three participants, two referred to behavioural changes in response to what they were experiencing:

"I was very concerned what if my mother would die - I was not going to allow myself to be so emotionally close to her"

"I washed my hands thousands of times a day, I prayed thousands of times a night, if I did not do this I was afraid that something bad would happen ... I could not help myself"

"I was afraid to go to sleep in case I did not wake up and died in my sleep," I tried not to sleep"

"I did what was necessary to survive, withdrawing and numbing myself"

The behaviours, as revealed by the above data, may be construed as defensive processes indicative of psychopathology. Defensive processes are considered by Bowlby (1980) to be a regular constituent of mourning at every age. However, in a young child, an experience of loss of an attachment figure is apt to
evoke psychological processes of a kind that are crucial for psychopathology (Bowlby, 1980).

6.4.3.c: Assuming adult roles and responsibilities

Two of the three participants perceived their roles to have altered following their fathers death:

"as a child I would sit up with my mother at night and try and console her"

"I had to grow up fast, his death made me grow up fast"

Early parent loss may act as an impetus for changes in roles and responsibilities for young children, so that maintaining generational boundaries may be difficult (Gass-Sternas, 1995). As indicated in the preceding data, early bereaved children may be compelled to assume more adult-like responsibilities that would not otherwise be demanded should their fathers not have died.

6.4.4: Changes In Perception In The Developing Years

In the years following the loss of a father, children may experience alterations in their perceptions as it pertains to themselves (Furman, 1974; Thompson & Payne, 2000), their families (Schilling & Koh, 1992), and their situatedness in the world (Schilling & Koh,
1992). Included in this core theme are the sub-themes of a: Low self-esteem, b: Stigmatisation, c: Difference of families and d: Feeling isolated.

6.4.4.a: Low self-esteem

Two of the three participants discussed their perception of themselves:

"it was hard not to see myself as a failure"

"something else I have had my whole life, a feeling of not being worthwhile, always feeling not good enough, not being deserving"

"I always felt like a nothing, a nobody"

Through the above data it can be gleaned that self-esteem may alter drastically when young children have experienced the death of a father. The loss of self-esteem is considered by Furman (1974) to be a significant risk factor for a young child following the death of a parent.

6.4.4.b: Stigmatisation

Of the three participants, two referred to their perceptions relative to others:
"seeing other boys and their parents, that always made me feel different"

"I did not regard myself to be as confident and carefree as my peers, compounding a worry that I was different"

"I felt different and have always up to this day"

The preceding data suggests that the loss of the father has an effect on young children’s perceptions of how they experience themselves through the eyes of others. Children who lose a caregiver claim to be different from their peers (Thompson & Payne, 2000), and this may be a sense of being stigmatised (Schilling & Koh, 1992).

6.4.4.c: Difference of families

Two of the three participants indicated changes in their perception with regards to their families:

"it changed the family system, we were no longer a whole family"

"I no longer had the mother I had before"

It is suggested from this data that for some children their perception of being "different" (Schilling & Koh, 1992) is not confined merely to one particular facet of themselves. Rather, their perception of
being “different” may, following the death of a father, extend to their view of their families.

6.4.4.d: Feeling Isolated

Of the three participants two related their perceptions of themselves to reflect a sense of isolation:

"I felt alone and unconnected"

"I was no longer whole - there was an emptiness"

"it was difficult for me to connect as I struggled to fit"

Schilling and Koh (1992) purport that in losing a caregiver children may feel isolated. In concurrence, the above data points to a sense of isolation which portrays "feelings of "disconnectedness" from those in the world around them.

6.4.5: The Loss As Time Evolves

While it is commonly held that early loss of a parent poses a risk for future development, much remains lacking as to the complexity of its later impact. The many disparities in outcome are further hampered by a lack of studies amongst those functioning in general society (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982;
Finkelstein, 1988) and that no longitudinal studies have been conducted (Black, 1996). This core theme includes the sub-themes of a: Absence of the loss, b: Re-emergence of the loss, c: Active mourning and d: Ongoing search for closure.

6.4.5.a: Absence of the loss

All three participants attested to a period of time in their lives in which the loss was absent as a concern in their lives:

"I think then up until high school it wasn’t something major on my mind at all, but by the time I got to high school, it became quite prevalent to me"

"for so many years I blocked out anything to do with it"

"there was no emotional concern about it growing up"

The preceding data finds support for the argument by Stokes et al. (1999) that, dependent on certain factors, children who experience early bereavement may undergo changes in feelings, behaviour and understanding. The implication is that as development ensues, children may seemingly adjust well to bereavement, but for some it may well be lying dormant.
6.4.5.b: Re-emergence of the loss

The three participants all experienced the impact of grief, from the earlier loss, in adulthood:

"it has only recently been safe enough for me to begin grieving, and small losses are resulting in disproportionately emotional responses"

"I have begun to recognize my need to grieve and to experience the emotions linked to a variety of losses"

"I have never grieved and am now grieving"

"only at 30 did it strike - that's a huge thing you know, to be hit with something that happened 27 years down the line"

Implied in the above data is that an early bereaved child may undergo the grief of the early loss in adulthood. This notion of the "sleeper effect" purports that disturbances or vulnerabilities may resurface in later life in response to stress or loss, long after the loss has occurred (Downdey 2000). This hypothesis does, however, remain largely untested (Downdey, 2000).
6.4.5.c: Active mourning

In experiencing their grief in adulthood, all three participants went through the process of mourning:

"I have begun to experience the emotions, and to see just how powerful it is emotionally, even today"

"recently, at my age, I bought a Frank Sinatra CD, which I know he liked, played it incessantly, and cried and cried"

"I lost him for the second time at 30, I started questioning, so you know, you go into depression, there was a lot of crying"

Bowlby (1980) identifies the characteristics of mourning by children to include weeping, anger, restless searching, withdrawal and sadness. Similarly, the foregoing data points to early bereaved children not only experiencing active mourning in later life, but that the characteristics of the mourning process are not dissimilar on reaching adulthood.

6.4.5.d: Ongoing search for closure

Each of the three participants attempted to find closure of their fathers' death:
"on previous occasions I have approached it as something to sort out and complete, only to be disappointed to find it resurfacing again and again"

"I thought I had dealt with everything, but I have never got over his death"

"it’s going to be something that I need to deal with, it’s not a full stop, it’s a comma"

Much of the confusion and uncertainty surrounding children’s responses to bereavement is attributed to what is considered to be the cyclical and repetitive nature of childhood bereavement (Huss, 1999). The above data suggests that this may indeed be the nature of childhood bereavement, and possibly, this remains an ongoing characteristic of early parental bereavement.

6.4.6: Feelings And Needs As An Adult

Within a non-psychiatric population, early parent loss is considered to exert a powerful pathogenic influence which may take the form of different manifestations (Sklar & Harris, 1985), both in feelings and needs. The sub-themes of this core theme include a: Emptiness, b: Anxiety, c: Search for identity, and d: Need for psychotherapy.
6.4.6.a: Emptiness

Either at some point in adult life, or as an ongoing feature, all three participants referred to a feeling of emptiness:

"this diffuse feeling of emptiness and unsafety is something I have always carried with me, it's a familiar part of me"

"I feel such an emptiness, a space that no-one else ever filled"

"and you feel this void, and you ask how come?"

Sklar and Harris (1985) refer to indirect manifestations of anxiety, as a consequence of early parent loss, to include defences. These authors argue that the defences may contribute to incomplete mourning which gives rise to varied emotions, of which emptiness is one of several. Consistent with this argument, the aforementioned data is indicative of feelings of emptiness in adults who have suffered early parental bereavement.

6.4.6.b: Anxiety

Two of the three participants referred to feelings of anxiety:
"It's my struggle to hold my anxiety, it plays out in many ways (laughs), I'm a smoker and I drink many cups of coffee!"

"I have come to accept that I do require a certain amount of structure in my life in order to limit my anxiety"

"there is this underlying fear, this extreme exhaustion constantly, it's a draining feeling"

In identifying anxiety as a manifestation of early parent loss in a non-psychiatric population, Sklar and Harris (1985) purport that the anxiety may take the form of fearfulness. Similarly, in concurrence with this, and the above data, it is argued that heightened anxiety may be triggered by parent loss in childhood, which may then sensitise the child to anxiety through adulthood (Furukawa et al., 1998).

6.4.6.c: Search for identity

The three participants all questioned their identity:

"I felt I had no idea of who I was"

"I have struggled with identity issues, so my relationship with myself was difficult"

"it has taken so much work to unravel me, the mystery of me"
"all of a sudden it was like, you question yourself, who are you, what are your roots, you have this surname X, why am I carrying this surname?"

The above data attests to a struggle with identity for adults who have experienced early father loss. Sanders (1993) purports that when personal identity is strongly connected to the deceased, it becomes necessary to re-structure a new identity. It would seem then that early bereaved children may in their developing years embark on a quest for identity.

6.4.6.d: Need for psychotherapy

All three participants sought therapy regarding their childhood loss:

"I recently attended a workshop, it was amazing, it's almost making peace with your family structure, there was a process there where I had to deal with it"

"recently I was told by a psychologist that I have never grieved, and am now grieving"

"so with this process of questioning, I think that was the time when I started therapy"

Bowlby (1980) considers healthy mourning to comprise of a reorganization of self and situation, so that a
timely resolution of the loss transpires. To this end, the therapeutic process could be construed as providing an opportunity for such reorganization. The preceding data thus indicates that early bereaved children may in adulthood seek out, and so benefit from, a means such as that offered by therapy, to undergo this process of reorganization.

6.4.7: Meaning-Making In The Context Of Ongoing Life

Stokes et al. (1999) suggest that bereaved children, as with adults, need to find an appropriate place for the dead person in the context of their ongoing lives. This, these authors contend, involves an ongoing meaning-making process. This core theme includes the following sub-themes: a: Assigning a role to fathers: protectors and guides, b: Seeking some value from the loss, c: Continuing the relationship and d: Living up to father.

6.4.7.a: Assigning a role to fathers: protectors and guides

Each of the three participants perceived that their fathers would have played a particular role in their lives:

"a father would be structuring, putting in place a containment, holding my anxiety"
"I have felt as if having a dad would've prevented so many terrible things"

"I keep thinking that if he had stayed alive I would've had such a different whole life"

"that pride, that when are you getting married, that whole aspect of a guide and protector and wanting the best you know, as a father"

Of the processes involved in meaning-making, the perceived role that the deceased would take is considered to be a feature (Stokes et al., 1999). The foregoing data indicates that early bereaved children may attribute a particular role to their deceased fathers. The data also suggests that fathers are perceived to be protectors and guides, which does remain a salient concern amongst fathers (Anderson, 1996).

6.4.7.b: Seeking some value from the loss

All three participants sought meaning from the death of their fathers:

"it's a blessing and a curse"

"it's been a motivating force"

"it's allowed me extreme sensitivity to other's and their pain, I'm extremely caring"
"in a sense if that didn't happen I don't know if I would be here right now ... successful"

"to go through the process of looking at yourself, it's a healing"

As purported by Stokes et al. (1999), this data suggests that the experience of bereavement may necessitate an ongoing meaning-making process. The implication is that early bereaved children may look for some value in their loss when reaching a later developmental stage.

6.4.7.c: Continuing the relationship

Two of the three participants indicated that their fathers continue to play a role in their lives:

"I regularly have internal conversations with my father"

"my relationship with my father grows and evolves as I do"

"I talk and pray to him and ask him for guidance constantly"

"I feel as if he is looking out for me"

It would seem from the above data, that not only do bereaved children contemplate what role the deceased
parent would take in the context of their ongoing lives (Stokes, et al. 1999), but that this is a role that is kept alive. This suggests that early bereaved children may maintain a continued relationship of some form with their deceased fathers.

6.4.7.d: Living up to father

Of the three participants, two placed value on their fathers’ perceived approval:

"I have wondered what he would be thinking of me and what I am doing"

"Would he approve of who I have turned out to be and what I am doing with my life?"

"I wish he was alive to see what has happened in my life, met my children, maybe been proud of us?"

Finkelstein (1988) purports that early bereavement of a parent has the potential to evoke idealization of the parent, which in turn may lead to endeavours by the child to meet the standard that the deceased parent is considered to represent. Similarly, this data indicates that the early loss of a father may, for bereaved children, create a sense of living up to their fathers’ perceived expectations throughout their lives.
6.4.8: Feelings connected to the deceased

Furman (1974) contends that early death of a parent engenders a longing for the deceased by the bereaved child. Furthermore, Furman (1974) argues that the nature of this longing is likely to be of an incomparable amount, intensity and longevity. This core theme comprises the sub-themes of a: longing for the symbolic father and b: longing to know father.

6.4.8.a: Longing for the symbolic father

Each of the three participants expressed a longing for a father either on a continuous basis, or at some point in life:

"for some reason it became very important to me that "idea" of a father"

"I want to have a "dad" as part of my life so badly"

"that aspect that you can say "my father and I when we went to the zoo or whatever", that aspect that you felt you might have lost"

The foregoing data indicates, as argued by Furman (1974) that the experience of early bereavement may evoke a sense of longing in the early bereaved child. More specifically, this data suggests that the longing may not be confined to the parent per se, but
to that which the parent is felt to represent. In this sense, the early death of a father may give rise to a profound longing for the symbolic father.

6.4.8.b: Longing for information about a father

All three participants expressed a need for information about their fathers:

"I would treasure some highly individualized and personalized memories of my father"

"I want to find out everything I can about him, talk to people who knew him, touch his life"

"what about me? Because I really don’t know much about this man, I really just know my picture" (of him)

It would seem, from this data, that the feelings engendered by early parent death might involve a longing (Furman, 1974), which pertains to knowing who the father, as a person, actually was. This suggests that the early death of a father may leave bereaved children with an intense longing for information that tells them about their fathers.

6.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has comprised of the results of a phenomenological inquiry into the experience of
losing a father in the pre-school years. Through the transformation and synthesis of the naïve descriptions of the individual participants, the researcher has derived eight core themes. These themes, by reflecting the essential structure of the experience of losing a father in the pre-school years, have allowed for a privileged access to the nature of this experience.
CHAPTER SEVEN

EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This study sought to extract meaning of the experience of losing one's father in the pre-school years. The discussion that follows is concerned with the findings as they pertain to avenues for further investigations, methodological strengths and limitations, and relevant implications.

7.2 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the utmost care has been taken to address the limitations of this study, several methodological disadvantages are acknowledged. As previously discussed, unlike quantitative research in which validity relates to confidence in the measuring instrument, the validity in this investigation depends largely on whether the power of this presentation convinces the reader of its accuracy. The researcher has thus made explicit the philosophical ground on which this study is based, the method of access and interpretation and inclusion of data sample. In so doing, a means for intersubjective judgement is provided.

The transformation and synthesis of the raw data does, however, introduce subjectivity. Not only does
the data selection rest on the researcher's subjectivity, but the possibility exists that other researchers would interpret the raw data and arrive at themes which differ to those concluded in this study. Efforts to reduce subjectivity have also included follow-up interviews with the subjects in order to verify their realities and meanings. Nonetheless, by the nature of this research, subjectivity is indicated.

In converting the recorded data to transcripts, the researcher has attempted to ensure accuracy. Although the transcripts have undergone several checks, this does not altogether preclude the possibility that errors have not been made.

This study cannot claim to prove the generalizability of its findings with regard to population characteristics. Rather, the issue of generalizability for these findings is concerned with the specificity of the essential description. It is however asserted that universalization is not demanded of all inquiry, particularly where contexts are important and tend to relativize findings (Giorgi, 1997).

In light of the above, while extreme care has been taken to eliminate all prejudice, potential bias and error in arriving at findings that accurately reflect the experience of losing a father in the pre-school years, cannot be entirely ruled out.
Albeit that limitations exist in this study, the approach used in this study may be credited for its descriptive power and so for the potential richness of detail of individuals' experiences. By deriving concepts and themes that reflect the perceptions of the experience of early bereavement, important human qualities of the subjects can be revealed, which may contribute to the existing theoretical formulations and prior research. In this way, our understanding of this experience may be amplified and potentially lead to several consequences. It is hoped that this study, owing to its phenomenological approach, has provided a deeper and clearer understanding of what it is like for someone to lose a father in the preschool years.

7.3 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

On evaluating the findings of this study, the researcher is struck by the sharp contrast between the dry literature and the richer, more human experience provided by the participants. This suggests the need for further phenomenological research in the area of childhood parental bereavement and its subsequent impact. Several areas for further research that have emerged from this study are provided in the following discussion.

It is worth noting that of the three participants in this study, the participant who expressed the least distress over her father's loss was the last born of
six children and lived, throughout her developing years, both with her nuclear family and extended family. Additionally, an older brother assumed a fathering role in her life. This points to the possibility of different family compositions influencing the outcome, which may also then implicate the influence of diverse cultures. Isolating the variables that act to mediate or moderate the long-term vulnerability that is experienced by some early bereaved children provides a wide forum for future research.

Based on the lack of clarity surrounding the outcome of early parent loss, it would seem that many questions that surround this experience may best be answered by longitudinal studies. Such research may address the debate as to whether bereaved children are more vulnerable to later stress or loss, and whether there are particular developmental periods that are more susceptible to the impact of the loss. Longitudinal studies could also facilitate the development of an effective screening measure to target potential at-risk individuals in order to reduce the likelihood of long-term negative outcomes.

Given that participants in this study alluded to the success of themselves in their meaning-making process of this loss, it may be that the "presence" of the father has served as a catalyst towards their achievement. Alternatively, the researcher questions whether striving for success could be the means to
ward off anxieties and insecurities that may have emerged from this early experience. These questions offer potential for future studies.

7.4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the focus of this study has concentrated on the experience of adults who have lost a father in the pre-school years, implications are brought to the fore that pertain specifically to this experience, as well as to the general experience of early parental bereavement.

Ideally, these descriptions could lead to a greater sensitivity and appreciation toward those who experience early parental bereavement. Specifically, clinicians may be encouraged to consider Bowlby’s theory and the individual’s lived experience when engaging with clients who have suffered this early loss. In other instances, dependent on the current difficulties presented by adult clients, it may be worthwhile to explore the possibility and influence of a parent’s death during childhood.

Of particular concern to the researcher is the question of availability of existing services to our children in the South African context, in which the grieving of parental loss is frequent. This implicates the role taken by clinicians and researchers alike, with regard to social action and public policy. Interventions exist that can assist
with the immediate distress of childhood bereavement and so potentially help prevent mental health problems in the future (Black, 1996). By necessity this would require public awareness of, and response to, children’s vulnerability when losing a caregiver, as opposed to intervention only when emotional and behavioural difficulties have reached pathological levels. Primary prevention involving educational programmes could provide the first step in preparing children for bereavement. The development of community-based children’s bereavement services that are easily accessible and culturally responsive may go a long way in alleviating a potentially tainted or scarred life.

Finally, if a retrospective study such as this one enhances our understanding of the experience of losing a father in the pre-school years, it would seem logical to focus on the experience of recently bereaved children using phenomenological research methods. Providing children with the opportunity to tell their story, to be heard and ask questions as part of a research process could, simultaneously, meet the need for intervention.

7.5 CONCLUSION

For those adults who have lost a father in their pre-school years, any attempt to measure the loss as it pervades, or has at any point pervaded in their lives, presents as an improbable task. We are
however afforded the means to understand what this loss is like through phenomenological methods. In opening up their subjective worlds, the participants in this study have provided insight into the experience of losing a father in the pre-school years. In so doing, they leave this researcher with the thought, that the healing that time supposedly brings to the grieving process, may not necessarily come with the passing of time alone.
REFERENCE LIST


