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'They all look as if they're coping, but I'm not': the relational power/lessness of 'youth' in responding to experiences of bereavement

## Journal Item

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**‘They all look as if they’re coping, but I’m not’:  
the relational power/lessness of ‘youth’ in responding to  
experiences of bereavement**

**Abstract**

Experience of significant bereavement is reported by the majority of young people in contemporary western societies, but it receives little attention from mainstream services or academics, and this marginality is paralleled in young people’s everyday bereavement experiences. Existing academic and professional work concerned with children and young people’s experiences of bereavement largely centres on cognitive understandings of death, and individual intra-psychic processes and responses in the context of relevant ‘developmental tasks’. And yet some writers suggest that the key feature of young people’s experiences of bereavement is their relative powerlessness, rather than any particularities of cognition or affective responses. At the same time, the meanings that young people themselves attribute to their experiences may be crucial to any explanations of ‘risk’ for negative ‘outcomes’ that may be associated with bereavement. Furthermore, as exemplified by new case studies discussed in the paper, it is clear that young people are active agents in their family and peer group contexts. This article offers a discussion of bereavement in the context of ‘youth’ as a relational and institutionalised social status, and explores some theoretical issues potentially raised by the themes of death and bereavement in the context of youth studies generally.

**Introduction**

Bereavement is a stage of life evoking even more anxiety than adolescence...  
(Walter, 1999: 141)

While the particular anxieties aroused by young people may differ from those precipitated by bereavement, both the situation of ‘youth’ and the experience of bereavement may similarly evoke unease, being seen as threatening to the rational order and self-control of modern civilised society, a time of marginality with possibilities for ambiguity and disruption. Similarly, both statuses may also be understood as transitional, a time of change and uncertainty, potentially arousing fears of the unknown and the chaotic. The conjoining of bereavement and young people may thus suggest a double jeopardy, invoking deep anxiety, whether among professionals, academics and researchers, or among people in their everyday lives, as we consider the transitions and potential disruptions of young people who are dealing with issues of bereavement.

This paper arises from a review of the literature<sup>1</sup> on bereavement, loss and young people<sup>2</sup>, along with the development of new case studies of young people talking about bereavement issues in their lives. The full literature review has been wide ranging, covering many theoretical, methodological, substantive, and practical issues:

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<sup>1</sup> The project was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> The focus of the project was loosely defined by reference to the teenage years. However, much of the literature on bereavement and young people is embedded in broader discussions about bereavement and children more generally. At times, therefore, the discussion here will refer to children as well as young people.

from the possible implications of parental death for long-term risk of depression, to the frequency of bereavement experiences among young offenders; from the desirability of including death and bereavement as a general feature of the school curriculum, to how best to help young people who have no-one to talk to; from the theoretical frameworks available by which to view teenagers, to the potential relevance of a focus on ‘meaning’ as a way forward to help unravel some of the complexities in the empirical findings and provide a basis for inter-disciplinary dialogue. In this present paper, I focus on the potentialities of bringing together the theoretical perspectives and methodologies of youth studies, and the issues raised by young people’s experiences of bereavement. This raises questions concerning the social position of ‘youth’ in relation to experiences of bereavement - and the associated power dimensions - along with the marginality of bereavement issues in youth studies generally.

### **Bereavement as a feature of young people’s lives**

Sociologists, anthropologists and historians concerned with issues of death and dying have discussed the difficulties of twentieth century western societies in knowing how to respond to issues of mortality (e.g. Aries, 1974, 1981; Field, 1996; Shilling, 1993; Walter, 1991, 1999). Death and bereavement are argued to be topics that contemporary western societies struggle to make sense of, resulting in a public absence/private presence of death (Mellor, 1993), with grief and bereavement given over to medical expertise (Seale, 2001). At the same time, ‘expert’ theories of grief function as a form of social regulation, or ‘policing’ of internal emotions (Small and Hockey, 2001; Walter, 1999), as people struggle to make sense of death and bereavement in the context of post-Enlightenment societies which stress rational choice, self-control, and privatised meanings. Indeed, the development of such expert forms of knowledge and guidance may arguably reflect a wider trend for modern societies to seek to avoid confronting the inevitability of human pain, suffering, and ‘the full terror of disappointment’ (Craib, 1994: 28). Similarly, adults may seek to protect children (and, perhaps, themselves) from knowledge of adult inability - despite the baffling wonders of technological advance – to shape and protect life from pain, death and loss.

Young people, however, are generally understood to be in the process of leaving such innocence of protected childhood behind. The material affluence of western societies may be argued to have underpinned the establishment of modern childhood itself, as a distinct and institutionalised phase of the life course, and material prosperity has also been responsible for a historically new association of death with ageing. Such dual processes have led academics and the lay public alike to treat bereavement as a marginal issue in the lives of children and young people, relevant to only a small, if unfortunate, minority. At the level of the experiences of young people themselves, however, we may distinguish between:

- bereavement that has significance for major emotional or biographical disruption, raising issues, perhaps, of increased vulnerability, a threat to existing meaning systems, a challenge to identity, and a sense of difference or stigma, and
- death and bereavement as ‘normal’ experiences in the lives of young people.

Is bereavement thus an aspect of ‘growing up’ that all young people have to deal with, a ‘normal’ part of the teenage learning curve (that may or may not raise issues of loss

and suffering), even while for some particular individuals it may become a dominating and highly disruptive feature of their lives? If so, how do we view these variable experiences (of 'normality' or 'difference') of bereavement – as a dichotomy or a continuum? And whose view is key here in determining how to understand the significance of any particular bereavement experience – the concerned adult onlooker, or the young person her/himself? Furthermore, might the same experience have a changing significance for the same individual at different times and in different contexts?

Nevertheless, despite such variability, prevalence statistics would suggest that bereavement is an issue for mainstream youth services and researchers to consider as part of their normal practice and focus of concern, as well as one for specialist bereavement organisations and academics to deal with (Ribbens McCarthy with Jessop, 2005). While the existing evidence is not clear about the frequency of experience of particular categories of death, overall the great majority (as high as 92%) of young people in the UK report having experienced bereavement with regard to what they consider to be a 'close' or 'significant' relationship (sometimes including pets) before the age of 16 (Harrison and Harrington, 2001). Such experiences will be even more common by the age of 18 or 25, and evidence from the USA suggests similarly high levels (Ewalt and Perkins, 1979). Such bereavements in the lives of young people may include a wide range of deaths: while the specialist literature has generally focussed on (nuclear) 'family' relationships (particularly parents and siblings), bereavement among teenagers may also concern the deaths of lovers, partners, unborn children, friends, and acquaintances, as well as a variety of second degree relatives.

While the most frequent bereavements reported by young people concern the death of a grandparent, or other second degree relative, the death of a parent before age 16 is not as uncommon in affluent western societies as might be supposed. In the USA, for example, 6.1% of adolescents between the ages of 13-17 have experienced the death of a parent (Ayers et al, 2003). Figures for the death of a sibling seem to be similar to (or perhaps slightly lower than) figures for the death of a parent (Harrison and Harrington, 2001). The prevalence of bereavement due to death of a close friend is yet more elusive, but may be two or three times more common than these deaths of near relatives (Harrison and Harrington, 2001; Meltzer et al, 2000).

Within such overall patterns, the likelihood of young people experiencing bereavements will vary by locality and social circumstances, since life expectancy varies very significantly by social class, geography, and locality (Mitchell et al, 2000; Shaw, 1999). So we would expect the death of a parent to vary accordingly, as well as death of a sibling, with infant mortality, for example, being strongly related to father's social class (Schuman, 1998). Variations in mortality rate according to ethnic group are not so well established in the UK (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006), but Nazroo (2001) argues that an analysis of variations in mortality and health between ethnic groups requires careful attention to issues of socio-economic class, as well as racial identity and experiences of racism.

Overall, then, it is clear that the vast majority of young people – whatever their circumstances - experience the death of a close or significant person in their lives before the age of 18. In this sense, bereavement is a statistically 'normal' part of

growing up. On the other hand, death of a member of the immediate family – particularly a parent or sibling – may be more of a minority experience, albeit a fairly substantial minority, particularly for some localities and social groups. This has major implications for the organisation and delivery of mainstream and specialist services concerned with young people. But what is readily apparent is that the existing academic and research literature (inadequate as it is – Ribbens McCarthy, 2006) overwhelmingly focuses on experiences of significant difference and disruption in relation to bereavement, and we know very little about issues of death and bereavement in the lives of young people generally. We have very little evidence to know whether bereavement might be understood by young people, for example, as part of a general life course which may entail all sorts of disruptions over the years, or whether (and when) it is indeed viewed as a disruption of a *different kind*.

### **Dominant theoretical frameworks**

In reviewing the existing evidence, it is apparent that the dominant theoretical frameworks, underpinning research on bereavement and young people, are based in psychological theories of child development on the one hand, and of ‘normal’ grief processes on the other. Indeed, the concept of ‘bereavement’ *in itself* is strongly rooted within psychological and medical perspectives. One pervasive theme of the literature thus concerns children’s and young people’s cognitive and intellectual understandings of death. Another concerns the implications of significant (most generally, parental) bereavement for mental health issues, particularly depression, and other aspects of individual social and psychological well-being (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006).

Furthermore, these themes are heavily framed by a view of teenagers as ‘adolescents’, confronted with particular developmental tasks and conflicts to be resolved. Bereavement is seen as interfering with this ‘natural progression’ (Fleming and Adolph, 1986; Fleming and Balmer, 1996), often understood in terms of universal processes (e.g. see Hogan and DeSantis, 1994). Particular areas for concern are seen to involve: ambivalences around relationships; implications for cognitive capacities; threats to identity formation; and particular risks for psychopathology among adolescents. The theoretical framework of ‘adolescence’ is also very apparent in the professional and practice literatures, such that this perspective could be said to have become institutionalised.

The alternative theoretical perspective, of young people as occupying a particular, institutionalised social position of ‘youth’ in western societies, has yet to be exploited for its potential to raise new questions and offer different insights into the bereavement experiences of young people. At the same time, the theoretical issues raised by such bereavement experiences have yet to be considered within those more general sociological approaches that focus on ‘youth’. From this alternative theoretical perspective, then, ‘youth’ is a relational category, sometimes seen as the product of the State’s decisions concerning the political significance of age (Mizen, 2004), but more often theorised as a time of ‘transition’ (e.g. see Brannen et al, 2002; Kehily, 2006b; Pole et al, 2005) between the statuses of child and adult, with youth constituting ‘...a specific process in which young people engage with institutions such as schools, the family, the police, welfare, and many others’ (Wyn and White, 1997: 3). Nevertheless, wider cultural ideas and images may also become attached to

the concept of 'youth' (Featherstone, 1995; Wyn and White, 1997), such that its meaning has the potential to become detached from age, to signify the possibility of 'being anything you want to be' (ibid: 21). Frith (2005, discussed by Kehily, 2006a) thus considers 'youth' as potentially defined by reference to a person, an attitude, or a social institution.

It is beyond my remit here to exploit the potentialities opened up by bringing the issues raised by bereavement experiences into active dialogue with the issues and theoretical perspectives of youth studies. But there are clear possibilities for links around such themes as risk, identity, the body, deviance, peer groups and significant relationships, which potentially point to a variety of types of bereavement such as suicide, drug related deaths, miscarriage and abortion, accidental deaths, violent deaths, as well as the development of links with the more recognised issues of parental or sibling bereavement.

To take but one example of the ways in which bereavement issues may relate to more general aspects of youth studies, one theme identified in relation to the family lives of young people is a significant ambiguity about young people as moral agents. Children generally are thus positioned outside of moral accountability in contemporary western societies (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2000), while adulthood is understood as requiring a moral accountability – that may also, arguably, be increasingly individualised and disembedded (Thomson and Holland, 2002). One aspect of the status of youth, then, is a complex and uncertain position in terms of whether or not young people are seen as morally accountable in their own right, both in relation to the care of others and care of self. Thus, while adults may perceive the teenage years in terms of a growing independence, with freedom to make their own choices, young people themselves may see such independence as entailing a growing responsibility (Gillies et al, 2000), including the sort of stringent requirements for self-control of the body and emotions that Elias (2000) and Featherstone (1995) discuss, pointing to particular issues around risk-taking. Young people may be exploring the limits, possibilities, advantages and disadvantages of (loss of, or excessive) control of the body and emotions, and this may implicate particular meanings around death, which so crucially centralises understandings of what the body signifies, and how we respond emotionally to ultimate issues of attachment, loss and mortality.

In these various ways, then, young people may be 'testing out' the limits of reality and the possible consequences (Holland, 2002), such that death, bereavement and powerful emotions of grief, may indeed have a particular significance in this context. And, while the responsibility for managing the potential disruptiveness of children is seen to lie with adult caretakers (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards, 2000), this responsibility is diffused in the teenage years, leading to fears about teenagers as potentially disruptive without anyone being clearly responsible or in control.

An emphasis on 'youth' thus poses questions about the negotiation or assertion of power and responsibility. This may be particularly relevant to a consideration of bereavement, since a key feature of bereavement can be a significantly heightened sense of vulnerability. Bereavement and grief thus relate to general issues about how young people deal with vulnerability in public and private, and in the context of differing power relations.

In the remainder of this paper, I will briefly consider such issues of power, responsibility and vulnerability in relation to bereavement in the lives of young people. But before turning to the empirical evidence presently available on this issue, we must first note two particular consequences of the current dominance of the more individualised, psychological and medical perspectives. The first of these concerns a neglect of young people's experiences of bereavement as these occur within their everyday, localised and specific, social contexts of family, school and peer group (issues which will be considered further below in relation to the empirical evidence).<sup>3</sup> The second concerns a neglect of the cultural assumptions underpinning our knowledge of young people's bereavement experiences. And, while Rosenblatt suggests that there do appear to be some commonalities across all societies, since '...death seems to be difficult for many people in every culture' (2001: 288), he also stresses the need to understand that, within the context of interactions and relationships shaped by power differences as well as by cultural contexts, '...what follows a death may be as much discussion, interpretation, and social transaction as it is ritual' (2001: 295).

Issues of power and vulnerability therefore interweave with young people's experiences of bereavement in a great variety of ways – from the assertion and negotiations of cultural and racial differences, through aspects of material circumstances framed by class and locality, to the inter and intra personal dynamics of family, school and peer groups (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). In what follows, however, I am focusing on the question of whether, and in what ways, the specific power dimensions of occupying the relational and institutionalised social status of 'youth' can be seen to shape young people's experiences of bereavement. In this discussion I will be drawing primarily on the empirical evidence currently available, which has overwhelmingly centred on bereavements that may be considered particularly disruptive, especially the deaths of parents and siblings, before turning to some case study material from a broader range of bereavement experiences.

### **Young people, bereavement and power**

In order to explore aspects of young people's power/lessness in relation to bereavement experiences, we are reliant primarily on the limited qualitative evidence available. In this regard, we may note that there is an, as yet untapped, potential for the application of methodologies and theoretical perspectives drawn from the 'new childhood studies' (for example, Alanen and Mayall, 2001; James et al, 1998; Maybin and Woodhead, 2003; Prout, 2004), an important element of which has been to question, de-construct, or at least side-step, those psychological perspectives that are rooted in a developmental theoretical framework.

At the present time, however, in relation to young people's experiences of bereavement, much of the more qualitative, personal evidence that we have available is often anecdotal (e.g. see the websites provided by some bereavement organisations such as Cruse or Winston's Wish, which include sections for young people to write in about their experiences), autobiographical (e.g. Abrams, 1992; Perschy, 1997, or see the videos produced by the Leeds Animation Workshop and the Childhood

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<sup>3</sup> Although Neimeyer (2001a) suggests that there has, in recent years, been an increasing emphasis on 'local' practices for accommodating losses, and a reduced emphasis on theories of universal processes of grief.

Bereavement Network), or presenting individual portraits or pen pictures from practitioner case loads to highlight particular points for general advice books, framed by psychological and counselling perspectives (e.g. Bode, 1993; Mallon, 1998; Wallbank, 1991). Another important source is the report produced by Childline about calls they received that were primarily concerned with bereavement issues (Cross, 2002). But there is very little academic evidence available that draws on a narrative, biographical or ethnographic research methodology, or that applies a sociological or anthropological theoretical perspective, to consider the bereavement experiences of young people. In this regard, the five published narrative case studies developed for our project (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006) are unusual (discussed further below). Nevertheless, if we consider the qualitative insights available from the existing literature, it is possible to suggest some general themes in the views expressed by young people, bearing in mind that these sources generally concern the death of a close family member.

One such strongly expressed theme concerns the *overwhelming nature of the feelings* after some forms of major bereavement. While this may be an experience also shared by adults (with the emotions of grief sometimes being likened to madness, Walter, 1999), young people often suggest that their *emotions are not acknowledged*, (and see Neale, 2004), that they have nowhere to express them, or talk about them. There may thus be fear and concern about what constitutes 'normal' grief, and what is 'acceptable' behaviour. Young people may feel *guilty or confused* about their reactions, since these may not appear to be socially sanctioned, or, indeed, recognised. And, parallel to this lack of recognition, they may lack opportunities for establishing and following 'culturally accepted patterns of mourning' (Thompson, 1997: 62).

A lack of recognition and acknowledgement – whatever form this might take - of a young person's bereavement and its associated feelings, may also perhaps be reflected in those retrospective accounts provided by adults who have been bereaved of a parent or sibling during childhood (e.g. Davies, 1998; Holland, 2001). These accounts also show how grief may re-emerge *over time* at significant points in later life (Elliott, 1999; Pennells and Smith, 1995). And we shall see (below) with our case study of Neville, how the implications of major bereavement may deepen over time in ways that may not be perceived by those around.

Another major feature of the qualitative evidence concerning young people's bereavement experiences, centres on the way in which bereavement occurs within a web of *pre-existing and on-going social contexts*, which also help shape individuals' understanding of such life events. But, in this regard, *isolation and loneliness* are common themes, whether among family or friends, such that a sense of difference and a long-term sense of loneliness may be frequent experiences (Holland, 2001; Murphy, 1986). In Rosen's study (1984) of young people bereaved of a peer, 76% 'had been unable to share their feelings with anyone at the time of the loss and for a long time after' (quoted by Ringler and Hayden, 2000: 210).

A sense of *isolation within family relationships* can be due, in the case of parental death, to the surviving parent being unable to support their children because of their own grief. The more quantitative evidence certainly points to the importance of the relationship with the surviving parent for young people's responses (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). Indeed, in some cases a young person may be put into *direct risk of*

*major harm* from family members as a result of bereavement. A particularly disturbing feature of the calls to ChildLine (5% altogether) was the presence of associated problems of abuse and neglect (and, in turn, calls that were primarily categorised as being about physical or sexual abuse might mention bereavement as a feature of the child's situation).

*Dad came to my bed this morning. He said it wouldn't hurt. Mum died and I miss her.* (Anonymous caller, quoted in Cross, 2002:11)

Less extremely, other qualitative evidence from young people points to the ways in which they may feel *excluded from key family decisions* (such as whether or not to attend a funeral), and *basic information*, in relation to the illness or death of a family member (Cross, 2002; McNally, 2005). Young people may also feel that *particular expectations* are imposed upon them within their families (Demi and Gilbert, 1987; Sutcliffe et al., 1998), whether this involves 'getting on with life', or being urged to show *more feeling* (Worden, 1996).

At the same time, young people's accounts also point to wider risks of *social isolation, bullying and stigma outside family relationships* (Cross, 2002; Servaty and Hayslip, 2001; Worden, 1996). Young people may thus lose friends because their peers do not know to handle the situation, or be subject to outright bullying by others.

Besides the loss of the person who has died, many young people thus face secondary losses, such as a breakdown in other relationships (plus loss of innocence, and perhaps loss of role) during the bereavement process (Pennells and Smith, 1995). Indeed, the extent to which young people feel their lives have been changed as a result of bereavement has been shown to significantly mediate any association with measured depression (Harrison and Harrington, 2001).

The difficulties in social relationships, the lack of information, recognition, and of opportunities to talk<sup>4</sup>, and the continuing relevance of these issues over a long time-frame, are thus major themes to arise from the exploration of the 'voices' of young people. Furthermore, the powerlessness of young people to express and deal with their bereavement experiences at the time, and to have their feelings socially acknowledged, is linked by several writers to difficulties in adjusting to major bereavement (e.g Fleming and Balmer, 1996; Tyson-Rawson, 1996).

These themes point to issues about general social attitudes, and the possibilities of facilitating young people's peer group support, both in relation to highly disruptive bereavements, and other experiences of bereavement.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, concerns about social isolation within families, and opportunities for specialist interventions, also point to the importance of referral processes available to young people, with or without their parents acting as gatekeepers to specialist services and support, whether they are seeking clinical services, a listening ear, or, more commonly, basic information. Within mainstream services such as schools, the evidence is not encouraging about young people's views of the support and responses from teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here, however, that the value of 'talk', as a way of expressing grief emotions, may be variable between individuals, cultural and social groups, and historical periods (Ribbens McCarthy with Jessop, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> There is not scope in this paper to follow through the implications of these arguments for schools and other mainstream services concerned with young people, but see Ribbens McCarthy (2006).

As with adult family members, teachers too may omit to include young people in basic decisions, such as how they would like their schools to respond to a significant bereavement (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). Indeed, while adults may respond to the upheaval of bereavement by avoiding some social contexts altogether until emotions may be brought under control and to avoid the embarrassment of ‘breaking down’ in public, children and young people may have little choice with regard to whether they withdraw or continue to participate in public social settings, particularly in relation to their education.

Overall, while Cross (2002) describes the calls to Childline with regard to the difficulties bereaved young people may express in terms of understanding what they are feeling, she also suggests that the feelings they struggle to voice are no different in kind to the sorts of feelings experienced by adults in similar circumstances. Instead, she suggests, the differences centre more on the *lack of power* experienced by young people combined, frequently, with a sense of exclusion from decisions being made. The qualitative evidence available, then, points to the ways in which young people’s experiences of bereavement may raise particular issues as a result of their specific social positioning as ‘youth’ – both amongst their immediate social relationships, and within the context of wider institutional processes. The issues of power, in the context of young people’s experiences of bereavement, may thus throw ‘...into sharp relief questions of autonomy, selfhood and dignity’ (Thompson, 1997: 64).

### **Young people’s active agency**

At the same time, of course, young people are not passive recipients of others’ decisions and assumptions – they are also actively responding, asserting or negotiating their own perspectives, and developing their own understandings of what is occurring in their lives.

One key feature of the active agency of young people may be seen through their *engagement with their informal family and friendship relationships*. Where friendships are positive and constructive, for example, young people may find their peers to be the most helpful and important sources of support of anyone (Gray, 1989; Hogan and DeSantis, 1994; Holland, 2001). Furthermore, close supportive relationships with peers may not be seen to carry the potential disadvantages of power differences and control that may occur in relationships with parents (Gillies et al, 2001). And, while lack of communication within family relationships (discussed earlier) may be indicative of the relative powerlessness of bereaved young people, it may also reflect a young person’s own belief that *not* talking about the death is a form of protection – not mentioning things that might upset others, or be seen to add to their burdens. It is thus very clear that family members often develop unspoken practices of mutual protection and silence: ‘*Maybe the rest of them are just coping with it, or looking as if they’re coping, but I’m not*’ (Neville, discussed further below, emphasis added). In Neville’s case, it appears to the interviewer<sup>6</sup> that he has sought over many years to avoid imposing his own needs on his family, and to follow the initial lead suggested by his father, to ‘cope’ and ‘carry on’.

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<sup>6</sup> The interviewer for Neville was Sheena McGrellis, a member of the original research team at London South Bank University.

Mutual protection thus reveals some of the ambiguities about issues of power. There is evidence of young people, for example, seeking to avoid thinking about the death of a sibling in order to be able to support and soothe their parents (Demi and Gilbert, 1987). Worden (1996) found widespread tendencies for parentally bereaved children and young people to be worried about the safety of their surviving parent, and to be trying to be ‘good’ and helpful – a striking example of how the children and young people themselves may be active moral agents in the situation.

But perhaps the most notable way in which we can see young people’s active agency, despite their relative powerlessness, is through the *search for meaning* in response to bereavement experiences. Such a search, within young people’s accounts of their bereavement experiences, may at times be understood to refer to broad spiritual or existential issues, such as: beliefs about an after-life; whether a death had any purpose; whether there is anything to be ‘learned’ from it at a personal level; how it may shape a young person’s approach to life generally. But, from a more symbolic interactionist perspective, the search for meaning might also refer, in a more mundane sense perhaps, to the manner in which people inevitably seek to be able to respond to, or think or talk about, events in their lives, building on whatever set of assumptions, constructs, or expectations individuals already use to build their everyday worlds upon. This latter sense of the search for meaning does not necessarily connote the idea that a death is felt to be *meaningful* by a young person (although the more existential or spiritual search might seek to find such meaningfulness). But a fundamental characteristic of humans is arguably that people are sense-making entities, so that, with *or without* a view of death as meaningful, bereavement will inevitably lead to a search for some way to make sense of the event, enabling the individual to incorporate the experience into their on-going and unfolding ‘assumptive worlds’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), or everyday ‘typifications’ (Schutz, 1954).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the extent to which a particular death is experienced as threatening to an individual’s existing sets of meanings may be indicative of a bereavement that is experienced as disruptive (Riches, 2006), and thus outside of ‘normal’ growing up (as discussed earlier).

Furthermore, the attempt to understand young people’s own understandings may potentially shed light on some of the complexities and contradictions apparent in the quantitative evidence concerned with the (causal) implications that significant bereavement may have as a ‘risk’ factor for personal ‘outcomes’ in an individual’s life. As Rutter observes, ‘It has been crucially important to appreciate that risk derives as much from the meaning attributed to the event as from the objective qualities of the event itself’ (2000: 390). In particular, listening to young people’s own perspectives may reveal how similar events may have quite opposite implications for different individuals, with some finding new resources and strengths in response, while others struggle to cope at all (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). And yet, when individual data are aggregated for the purposes of statistical analysis, such contradictory patterns may effectively ‘cancel each other out’ and be lost from view.

Even within the various qualitative approaches that we have considered above, however, there is variable scope for perceiving this search for meaning. This is, however, one of the strengths of a narrative approach, particularly where narratives have been documented over a period of some time, where we can see how young

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<sup>7</sup> The various approaches to the meaning of ‘meaning’, and their operationalisation for empirical research, are discussed further in Ribbens McCarthy (2006).

people attempt to consider what meaning bereavement has for their view of life – in both the more existential sense, and the more mundane sense outlined above. This is the approach taken in Ribbens McCarthy (2006) in presenting five case studies of young people talking about a variety of bereavement experiences, which both exemplify and extend the existing qualitative evidence discussed above. It is particularly noteworthy that these young people had *not* been interviewed for a study of bereavement as such, but as part of a series of general, qualitative and longitudinal, studies of the lives of young people in contemporary Britain.<sup>8</sup> In these studies young people in five varied locations in the UK volunteered to be interviewed about their life experiences over a period of years. In the course of these general interviews, some spontaneously discussed bereavement issues over this time, a feature of their accounts which was noted on the coding frame used. They were thus identifiable within the overall sample on that basis. Five were thus chosen for further analysis about their bereavement experiences, selected so that they would, overall, provide a considerable range of bereavement experiences, beyond the normal scope of current literatures. Furthermore, their analysis was undertaken on a narrative basis rather than through any pre-existing theoretical framework concerning bereavement and grief.<sup>9</sup>

Here I present abbreviated versions of just two of these case studies, chosen to present contrasting experiences. Even in this truncated form, the intention is to indicate what may be offered by a narrative approach, seeking to stay close to the themes and perspectives expressed by young people themselves, as these are framed by the individual's own sets of meanings, and providing a more holistic understanding of the overall life course as this occurs within specific social and cultural contexts. A search for meaning is thus quite explicit with Khattab (discussed further below) whose narrative constitutes important evidence of the ways in which bereavement may have highly significant implications for a young person's world view without necessarily being experienced as highly disruptive in an emotional or biographical sense. In Khattab's case, a religious framework provided an important resource for his responses to the various deaths that occurred among his family members and informal networks. The other case studies presented elsewhere (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006) centre less on religious sources of meaning for bereavement, but include: a renewed interest in the significance of family histories and identities (Shirleen, in response to the death of her great grandfather in Jamaica); a sense of being changed as a person and in overall outlook on life (Maeve, in response to the deaths of two friends); and a key theme of being unlucky or lucky in life (Brian, in response to the death of his father). With Neville (discussed further below) we find something much closer to the sorts of significantly disruptive bereavement experience discussed in the prevalent bereavement literature. Neville's interviews are thus dominated by his attempts to deal with the implications of his mother's death. Unlike the young people most generally studied in the bereavement literature, however, Neville is not in contact with any bereavement services, and does not receive any specific supportive intervention.

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<sup>8</sup> The studies were based at London South Bank University, under the direction of Professors Janet Holland and Rachel Thomson, and were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The most recent publication from these studies can be found in Henderson et al. (2006). Further details of the studies, the research methods, and other associated publications can be found at [www.sbu.ac.uk/fhss/ff/](http://www.sbu.ac.uk/fhss/ff/).

<sup>9</sup> The case studies were specifically written up for the current project, with the analysis undertaken by Sue Sharpe, one of the researchers working on the original studies.

**Neville** was interviewed five times, between the ages of 17 and 22. At the time of his first interview he was living with his parents and sister in a city in Northern Ireland, and was at college. But shortly before his second interview he had to deal with the sudden and traumatic death of his mother, without any prior indication, while they were alone in the house together: *'I don't think I ever will (get over it) because the picture that's stuck clear in my head, you know, what happened that day...'*

Neville relates how, two weeks after this death, his father developed some direction for the family when, having read a book on bereavement, he decided that they should try to set up some routine and return to work or college. *'... the family just decided to go on you know and not to dwell on the past and to go on... Because if you don't like, you'll just fall apart and be finished.'*

In the early interviews, Neville discussed support from his friends and he also had a steady girlfriend for a while, but she suddenly cooled off and they split up without him knowing why. Just a year after his mother's death, Neville was still finding life hard, vividly expressing the extent of his emotional struggles:

*Och, it's hard but you just have to go on and stuff... When it's really hard, it's like losing part of yourself... it's like learning to walk again... I'm finding it a bit harder. Maybe the rest of them are just coping with it or looking as if they're coping with it but I'm not. There's times when I really don't cope at all.*

To mark the second anniversary of his mother's death, he took the initiative to write up the whole event in great detail, showing it to his sister and leaving it with a tutor at college:

*... on the 8th January I sat down at the lap-top and wrote the whole thing out, from start to finish... It took me ten pages to write it but it was so, just like somebody lifting a weight off your shoulders.*

Neville spoke in this interview of the ways that he felt he had changed. While he did not directly link these changes to the bereavement, they are interwoven with the continuing narrative about his mother:

*You know, I'm not as out-going now as I was before... I think I'm a more emotional person now... I wouldn't be as strong as I was before. And I find it hard to get motivated most of the time now.*

He also described a calming down of his fiery temper, and spoke of his ability to make friends across the sectarian divides of his community.

Core themes that recurred in the interviews with Neville concerned issues around 'coping' (or not) and 'going on' (or not), and the changes he had felt in himself as a result of his mother's death. The death itself, which was clearly a traumatic experience, also continued to pre-occupy Neville over the years. While he appeared quite an isolated figure in dealing with his emotions, he did recount two strategies that he developed for himself: visiting the graveyard to talk to his mother, and the major event of writing it all down on the second anniversary of her death.

**Khatab** also actively seeks meaning in response to his rather different experiences of bereavement. Khatab, whose family came from Pakistan, lived in southern England

and was interviewed five times between the ages of 15 and 21, by which time he was a university student. His interviews were suffused with themes of 'success', in terms of his early ambitions to become a professional footballer, and his later ideas concerning education, marriage and family life.

*I used to think about, yeah, be a footballer, have all this money, you know and just do something you love, whatever, just follow your heart, but then as soon as I went to uni and I met some of these people, I realised that's just, you know... that's not it, that's not it.*

His relationship with his mother was also a prominent theme, and his concern to please her appeared to be an important element of his drive for success.

But success was also re-thought as a result of his experiences of death and bereavement. First the deaths of his grandmothers, and then a major health scare about his father, led him to consider the mortality of his own mother. '*Hope not, but your Mum's going to get old one day, and the same thing is going to happen. That made me wake up a bit...*' However, it was in the course of explaining his strengthened interest in religion that he spontaneously discussed the death of his 'uncle's' wife. As someone close to him in age, he discussed how this death really 'hit' him, raising his awareness of his own mortality:

*This lady, she's only 26 and she's gone. She left two kids behind so you know, it hit me, especially when my grandma passed away and what happened to my dad, I understand that you know, life's too short...*

This experience led him to prioritise concerns about life after death alongside concerns about life in this world.

*I started realizing... as much as I'm trying to hide it now you know, there is a God and I've got to worship Him so at the end of the day, 'cos I'll leave this life. All this thing about money, wife, child, it's not going to mean nothing if I don't live to see whatever, I don't know whether I'll live to see tomorrow, I don't know when I'll die you know, death doesn't need an invitation does it?*

At the same time, his religion was also discussed in terms of another area of life where he wanted to strive to do well, in order to achieve 'success' as a Muslim, with relevance perhaps both to life in this world and the next.

*I want to succeed in football, and I want to succeed in education, I want to succeed in life you now and I want to succeed as a Muslim, that's something else it's one extra thing but I want to succeed in it. I used to say to myself, I'll look into God when I'm older ...but this lady died at the age of 26... I don't know when death is going to come to me so I've got to prepare for it, try to prepare for death.*

In considering these two case studies, we might want to conclude that Neville's experience was indeed of a bereavement that constituted a 'different kind' of disruption from other major life events. But, at the same time, we can see the powerful significance of Khattab's bereavement experiences for his overall orientation to life.

In addition, perhaps, such case studies can convey, to some degree, the depths and complexities of the different 'realities' that are narrated by these young people around their varying experiences of bereavement. Others, writing on other substantive issues, or from other methodological frameworks, have also pointed to the need to understand children and young people's perspectives on their situations, and to see

these in the context of longitudinal accounts (Hetherington, 2003). Significant events in an individual's personal biography thus need to be understood by reference to their own sets of meanings, with bereavement a potentially particularly significant – sometimes disruptive – issue for the ways in which young people develop their world views and sense of identity. We can also begin to consider how such biographies may raise issues of the power/lessness of youth in relation to experiences of bereavement at this time in the life course.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have concentrated on aspects of power/lessness that relate specifically to the *social status of 'youth'* in relation to bereavement issues. I have consequently neglected the significance of any personal sense of power that individual young people may experience to variable degrees, for example, through an active or passive 'coping style' (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000). At the same time, such variations in personal styles may in turn link to wider issues of power/lessness via material or racial disadvantage. Thus Newman (2002) discusses the extent to which 'risk factors' in childhood generally intensify within an environment that offers poverty, racism and low social capital. And in relation to childhood bereavement specifically, research evidence points to the significance of multiple losses and disadvantage for a heightened risk of unwelcome outcomes such as mental health difficulties (eg Meltzer, 2000; Gersten et al, 1991).

But again, in considering such wider issues of context and social structure, an emphasis on meaning, as young people themselves construct this, may have an important contribution to make:

Because constructions of meaning represent the history, understanding and relationships of a culture, as well as the individual organization of experience, an analysis in terms of meaning connects personal and social processes better than the language of feeling, which has no collective counterpart. (Marris, 1996: 122)

Such an approach may thus have much to offer in terms of understanding the ambiguities, complexities and implications of power/lessness in the lives of bereaved young people.

Yet very little existing research has sought to understand young people's own understandings of bereavement experiences in their lives. It is clear that young people may be positioned in a way that makes it very difficult for their perspectives to be noticed or heard, neither as a child in need of special 'protection', nor as an adult who can speak up with varying degrees of confidence and power about her or his own needs, and social science research has tended to collude with, and compound, this position.

Aspects of the power/lessness of 'youth' may thus become starkly visible by a consideration of bereavement as a feature of young people's lives. There may then be considerable scope to enhance the existing literatures on these topics if we can raise new questions and shed fresh light by framing them through the theoretical lens of 'youth'. At the same time, while significant bereavement may indeed be a majority experience for young people, the societal and academic marginality of such topics within mainstream work concerning young people, suggests some profound questions

that may provide food for thought for us all, about our individual psychic and spiritual experiences and the nature of our social worlds.

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