

**SURVIVING SUICIDE: UNDERSTANDING  
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BEREAVED PARENTS**

by

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## **Abstract**

This study explored the lived experiences of ten bereaved parents who lost children aged 10 to 21 years old to suicide. Attachment theory was used as the conceptual framework for understanding the formation and maintenance of bereaved parents' attachment bonds to their deceased children. Data were collected through in-depth interviews that invited bereaved parents to describe their personal experiences of losing children to suicide and the creation of attachment bonds that survived death. A transcendental phenomenological design was used to analyze data from parent interviews. Results from data analysis revealed six core themes: (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, (c) remembering and including my child, (d) honoring my child's memory, (e) strengthening my connection to my child, (f) and unexplainable phenomenon. These six core themes illuminated the profound desire and need of bereaved parents to keep the memories of their deceased children alive, and the fear that the world would one day forget their beloved children. The significance of these findings can benefit researchers, scholars, and health care professionals in the provision of services and development of treatment interventions that would respect and appreciate the attachment bonds between bereaved parents and deceased children.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the 10 bereaved parents who participated in this study. I want to acknowledge the tremendous amount of courage and compassion these parents expressed in volunteering to be part of this dissertation study and offering to share their deeply personal and heartfelt journey through grief and bereavement after losing children to suicide. If it weren't for these parents, the completion of this dissertation would not have been possible.

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## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

The deaths of children to suicide are considered traumatic and devastating experiences in the lives of bereaved parents that threaten the basic functions of parenthood. This experience precludes parents from engaging in their instrumental roles of provider, comforter, protector, and advisor (Klass, 2001; Rando, 1985; Rubin & Malkinson, 2001). As a result, bereaved parents often experience guilt, shame, embarrassment, and self-blame as they struggle to rebuild their lives and find meaning in their children's death. When parents experience the loss of children to suicide, the predictability of the world is challenged and parental assumptions of outliving their children are shattered. As bereaved parents journey through grief, they are confronted with the formidable tasks of remaining connected to their deceased children and retaining their identities as parents. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of bereaved parents who have lost children to suicide and to understand the transformative nature of parent-child relationships throughout the grieving process.

### **Background of the Problem**

The effects of children dying from suicide reverberate throughout the immediate and extended family, disrupting the equilibrium of the family system and the cohesion between family members. Family communication after suicide becomes distorted and is often marked by ambiguity, blame, and secrecy (Cerel, Jordan, & Duberstein, 2008). The inevitable break down in family communication permeates the identities and functional roles of family members, significantly affecting the recovery processes for bereaved parents. The manner in which bereaved parents describe, process, and disclose their

bereavement narratives provide a window into the lived and extremely personal experiences of losing children to suicide. The emotional and psychological devastation associated with the death of children from suicide often leaves parents feeling overwhelmed and isolated from other survivors and support networks. Given that many bereaved parents desire the opportunity to share their grief with others (Dyregrov et al., Dieserud, Straiton, Rasmussen, Hjelmeland et al. 2010-2011; Maple, Edwards, Miers, Abbott, & Springer, 2012; Plummer & Minichiello, 2010), the social stigma attached to suicide may act as barriers for these parents, thereby interfering with the healing and meaning-making processes (Feigelman, Gorman, & Jordan, 2009; Feigelman, Jordan, & Gorman, 2008-2009; Maple et al., 2010). These social barriers may preclude bereaved parents from sharing the intimate details of their children and the formation and maintenance of parent-child connections after death.

The journey through grief and bereavement is an individual and complex process that presents numerous challenges for bereaved parents. One of these challenges concerns the continuation of parent-child attachments after death and parents' experience of having relationships with their deceased children. Prior to the death of children, parents experienced and cultivated their attachment bonds with their children in the external world. These attachment bonds were strengthened through the instrumental roles, activities, behaviors, interactions, communications, and interactions that parents engaged in with their children. These bonds were also cultivated by way of parents and children establishing and maintaining physical proximity to each other. The nature of death creates a physical separation between parents and children in the external world, threatening the continuation of parent-child attachments. Bereaved parents recognize that

the continuation of parent-child attachments in the external world is impossible and that new connections need to be formed and maintained to experience their attachment relationships with their children.

The bereavement research has described the manner in which bereaved persons continue their attachment relationships with deceased persons as continuing bond expressions (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). The development of continuing bond expressions have been conceptualized in the research as a multifaceted and multidetermined phenomenon that manifests psychologically, behaviorally, and emotionally throughout the bereavement process. Even though these bonds constitute a normative course in bereavement, the expression of continuing bonds are complex, dynamic, and diverse in their presentation over time and within the same individual (Field, 2006b; Harper, O'Connor, Dickson, & Carroll, 2011; Klass et al., 1996). Continuing bond expressions in the lives of bereaved parents may emerge as sensing their deceased children's presence, maintaining or using their possessions, evoking positive memories of them, and reminiscing about their children with others. Bereaved parents may also visit places once frequented by their deceased children as a way to feel closer to or connected with them, such as the mall, playground, baseball field, or favorite restaurant. Bereaved parents may visit the cemetery to maintain the gravesite or bring flowers, keepsakes, or share recent news with their deceased children. Together, these continuing bond expressions provide bereaved parents with a means of nurturing and sustaining parent-child attachments and experiencing their connections with their deceased children.

Given the diversity of continued bond expressions, researchers have predominately examined whether continuing bonds serve an adaptive function in bereavement-related adjustment, or if maintaining connections with deceased loved ones contribute to the development of complicated grief symptomology (Field & Filanosky, 2010; Field, Gal-Oz, & Bonanno, 2003). This debate over the adaptive or maladaptive nature of continuing bonds is recognized as the continuing-relinquishing bond hypothesis and has since generated much discussion on the role that continuing bonds have throughout the bereavement process. A preponderance of the research published on the expression of continuing bonds has employed quantitative methodologies, thereby neglecting the subtle, yet profound qualitative differences in experiencing this phenomenon (Boelen, Stroebe, Schut, & Zijerveld, 2006; Field & Filanosky, 2010; Field et al., 2003; Gudmundsdottir, 2009). A significant number of these research studies have examined the role of continuing bond expressions in the bereavement process among children, partners, siblings, relatives, friends, or other significant losses with minimal attention to bereaved parents. For those studies that did include bereaved parents, the time of loss was limited to those parents who lost an adult child in mid-life (Rogers, Floyd, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Hong, 2008), or relatively early in life (Gudmundsdottir, 2009). The exclusion of parents who have lost adolescent children to suicide in the literature underscores the need for additional research that describes how parents experience, make sense of, and develop new connections with their deceased children.

Drawing on the epistemological tenets of attachment theory, researchers have conceptualized continuing bond expressions as a response to an actual or perceived threat to attachment relationships (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010). These studies posited that

continuing bonds may serve as attachment-based strategies throughout the bereavement process by keeping the attachment relationship between bereaved persons and the deceased alive (Field, et al., 2005). For bereaved parents, attachment theory provides a conceptual model for understanding the individual differences and variations in continuing bonds, parental desires to maintain connections to deceased children, and the underlining dynamics inherent in continuing bond expressions. Attachment theory was used in the current study as a framework for exploring and describing the transformation of parent-child attachments after adolescent death to suicide.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Continuing bonds have received considerable attention in the literature and has been recognized as a fundamental element in grief and bereavement adjustment. Researchers have argued that continuing bond expressions may be considered a normative experience throughout the grieving process (Field, 2006a). Despite the attention that continuing bonds have received in the scientific literature, the term itself—continuing bonds—may be misleading for understanding and describing the parent-child relationship after death. The reference to the parent-child relationship as continuing bonds implies that the attachment bond between deceased and bereaved *continues* after death, minimizing the apparent and profound changes inherent in the attachment relationship. The death of children serves as a catalyst for bereaved parents to discover new ways to strengthen and maintain their connections with their deceased children. The development of these new connections may involve more of a *transformation* than a continuation of the dimensions and properties of the attachment bond. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the transformation and

experience of parent-child attachments among bereaved parents that lost children to suicide.

While an overwhelming amount of quantitative research has been published on continuing bonds and the effects of social stigma (Maple et al., 2010; Toller, 2005, 2008), grief difficulties and symptomology (Feigelman, Jordan, & Gorman, 2008-2009; Lindqvist, Johansson, & Karlsson, 2008), risk and protective factors (Field & Filanosky, 2010), mode of death (Rogers et al., 2008), and predictors of specific types of continuing bonds on grief and depression among bereaved persons (Boelen et al., 2006), these studies do not provide an adequate description of how bereaved parents experience the transformation of parent-child relationships following adolescent suicide. When qualitative designs were utilized, researchers focused on parental identity (Owens, Lambert, Lloyd, & Donovan, 2008; Thrift & Coyle, 2005), the role of social support in bereavement adjustment (Maple et al., 2010; Woodgate, 2006), attitudes and beliefs about life and death (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009), meaning-making (Begley & Quayle, 2007), and the psychosocial consequences and needs of surviving family members (Lindqvist et al., 2008; Miers et al., 2012).

Many researchers and scholars have attempted to understand the properties and functions of continuing bond expressions using quantitative methodologies; however, there continues to be a paucity of qualitative research on the emergence of this phenomenon as a lived experience among suicide-bereaved parents (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Harper et al., 2011; Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009; Woodgate, 2006). More specifically, researchers have not adequately explored the transformational process of parent-child attachments after the suicide death of children and the meaning that post-loss

connections have on parental grief and bereavement. This research study addresses the qualitative gap in the bereavement literature (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Harper et al., 2011; Maple, 2005; Parker, 2005; Steffen & Coyle, 2010) by using a phenomenological design to investigate the lived experiences and meanings of parent-child attachments after the suicide death of children.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The current research study sought to understand the lived experience of bereaved parents following adolescent suicide and explore how bereaved parents develop new connections with their deceased children. Attachment theory was used as a guiding framework for conceptualizing the development and transformation of the attachment relationship among ten bereaved parents. Phenomenological methods provided a deeper understanding and appreciation of these parents' journey through grief and their lived experiences in forming and maintaining connections with their deceased children. Through in-depth phenomenological interviews with bereaved parents, the current study produced additional scientific knowledge that may advance the discussion on parent-child attachments after child death from suicide and clarify common misunderstandings associated with continuing bond expressions. The research findings can advance scholarly discussion within the scientific community on suicide-bereaved parents who have lost children to suicide. Phenomenological research methods provided insight into the essence of these parents' lived experiences in forming and maintaining connections with their deceased children. The bereavement community has recognized the need for qualitative research (Lindqvist et al., 2008), particularly phenomenological research that highlights the lived experiences of bereaved parents (Begley & Quayle, 2007;

Gudmundsdottir, 2009; Harper et al., 2011). This phenomenological study addresses the gap in the literature and advances scientific understanding of parent-child attachments after adolescent suicide.

Evidence suggests that suicide bereavement is different from other forms of bereavement (Baddeley & Singer, 2009; Cerel et al., 2008; Feigelman et al., 2008-2009; Lindqvist et al., 2008) and may best be understood through qualitative exploration into the narratives of bereaved parents. Although bereaved parents may be considered a specific population, individual differences in parental bereavement and in the development of post-death connections with deceased children can exist. The manner in which bereaved parents process, describe, and give meaning to their bereavement experiences can vary not only between bereaved parents but also within the same parent at specific points in time, depending on where parents are in the grieving process. Furthermore, the development of new connections between bereaved persons and deceased loved ones may be considered unhealthy among certain populations; however, for bereaved parents, maintaining connections with their deceased children may be both healing and necessary in the evolutionary process of parent-child attachments. Results from the research study illuminated the fundamental nature of parent-child attachments post-loss and the profound meaning parents attributed to their connections with their deceased children.

### **Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore the profound emotional reactions experienced by bereaved parents and their personal journey through grief and bereavement following the suicide death of adolescent children. The research question

was: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?” The terms *lived experiences*, *parents*, *children*, and *suicide* deserve a brief discussion to illuminate the meaning of these terms within the context of this phenomenological study. The term *lived experiences* describes a participants’ daily physical, cognitive, and emotional actions and reactions to situations and thoughts that they encounter in their lives. The manner in which phenomena are constituted in consciousness involves a deep level of awareness of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts held by participants and the impact that phenomena has on them. Researchers have defined this complex relational process between participants and phenomena as intentionality of consciousness to highlight the act of cultivating self-awareness towards conscious experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The *lived experiences* of bereaved parents reflect the subjective experiences of losing children to suicide. These personal experiences are described in narrative form to convey the everyday feelings, thoughts, and impact that losing children to suicide has on parents. The term *parents* refers to those bereaved mothers between the age of 18 and 65 years old, regardless of ethnicity, religious orientation, and socioeconomic status that lost adolescent children to suicide. The term *children* refer to deceased adolescents of participants that died from suicide between 12 and 21 years of age. The term *suicide* refers to the method of self-inflicted death of these adolescents and includes intentional overdoses, hanging, and shooting.

### **Rationale, Relevance, and the Significance of the Study**

From a scientific perspective, this research study may provide significant contributions to the field of research and scholarly discourse among practitioners, researchers, scholars in academia, and human services professionals providing services

for bereaved parents. A phenomenological study on the lived experience of bereaved parents and the development of a new parent-child connection on parental adjustment to loss addresses the qualitative gap in the research community (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Fielden, 2003; Harper et al., 2011; Owens et al., 2008; Woodgate, 2006). Therefore, developing a deeper understanding and appreciation for the creation of a parent-child connection that transcends death is necessary for mental health professionals and the wider scientific community responsible for developing research-based treatment interventions. The current study underscores this need in the community and provides evidence to build a stronger relationship between theory, practice, and research (Stroebe et al., 2010).

Although a plethora of research has been published on the nature and function of continuing bonds in parental bereavement, the majority of these studies have been quantitative in design and limited in their applicability to individual parents experiencing the traumatic death of their children. Many of these quantitative studies have erroneously assumed that the phenomenon of continuing bonds are either maladaptive or adaptive in functioning, ignoring not only individual differences, but also the complex and dynamic nature of developing a new parent-child connection (Klass, 2006). Quantitative designs are replete with limitations that include, but not limited to, methodological flaws, instrumentation errors, participant selection, mortality of participants, and conceptual overlap in items being measured (Creswell, 2009; Field & Filanosky, 2010; Field et al., 2003). Stroebe and Schut (2005) concluded that no systematic, empirical evidence has been found to determine whether continuing bonds or relinquishing attachments with the deceased facilitate healthy adjustment to loss.

A phenomenological investigation on this topic may further human service professionals' awareness of how parents experience the transformational nature of parent-child relationships following the death of children from suicide. Such a study could illuminate the meaning attributed to post-death connections that parents have with their deceased children. Counselors could benefit from facilitating conversations with parents on their journey through grief and the creation and experience of having a connection with their deceased children. This therapeutic conversation would lead to the development of bereavement interventions and customized treatment plans (Toller, 2005). By opening a dialogue with parents on their personal experiences of creating and establishing post-death connections with their deceased children, counselors convey an appreciation and acceptance of parent-child attachments after death. This client-centered dialogue encourages bereaved parents to share an intense and deeply personal experience in their lives (Sanger, 2008-2009). A solid foundation of knowledge on suicide bereavement and the experience of post-death connections in the lives of bereaved parents are needed to adequately understand the significance and meaning attributed to parent-child attachments after death. The absence of such knowledge may implicitly convey a lack of empathy from the therapist that threatens the client-therapist relationship, leaving bereaved parents feeling unaccepted, abnormal, misunderstood, and distant from their counselor (Gudmundsdottir, 2009; Sanger 2008-2009; Taylor, 2005).

Evidence suggests that bereaved parents want to talk about their past and present relationships with their deceased children (Dyregrovetal et al., 2010-2011; Miers et al., 2012; Toller, 2005, 2008); however, bereaved parents often feel that mental health providers do not understand the importance of parent-child attachments after death

(Taylor, 2005). Recent research has assessed social worker competencies and comfort levels regarding the discussion of post-death relationships with bereaved persons (Sanger, 2008-2009). This research indicates that social workers lack sufficient knowledge and comfort necessary for discussing bereaved persons' attachments with their deceased loved ones. Phenomenological research may provide mental health professionals with a strong knowledge base to address and appreciate the creation and maintenance of post-death connections, as well as parents' personal journeys through suicide bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2005). The research findings from this phenomenological study should increase human service professional's awareness and understanding of the transcendental properties of parent-child attachments after death and reconceptualize the phenomenon of continuing bonds in the bereavement literature.

### **Nature of the Study**

A phenomenological model was used to explore the lived experiences of bereaved parents who have lost children to suicide and experience connections to their deceased children. The essence of suicide bereavement and the development of post-loss connections to deceased children are the phenomena being investigated. Attention was given to the bereavement narratives of parents that described the development and maintenance of post-death connections with their deceased children. In-depth interviews with bereaved parents were conducted at local libraries for the purpose of understanding how parents experience suicide bereavement and the transformation of parent-child attachments after death. Qualitative interviews were open-ended with minimal prompts. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a competent, certified transcriptionist. Phenomenological data analysis was executed to identify common themes expressed

between and within participant narratives (Moustakas, 1994). Attachment theory was selected as a framework for understanding and describing the development of new parent-child connections after the suicide death of adolescent children.

### **Definition of Terms**

***Attachment.*** The nature of the pre- and post-loss relationship between parents and children that manifest behaviorally, cognitively, emotionally, psychologically, socially, and spiritually (Klass, 2006; Klass et al., 1996).

***Bereaved parents.*** Mothers or fathers who have lost children between the ages of 10 and 21 years old.

***Bereavement.*** The objective experience of a loss and the capacity of the person to adapt to that loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2008; Worden, 2002).

***Breaking Bonds.*** The thesis that discontinuing the relationship with the deceased is advantageous to the bereavement process. This phenomenon is also referred to as *relinquishing bonds* (Stroebe & Schut, 2005).

***Continuing Bonds.*** The ongoing connection to the deceased that bereaved parents use to maintain an attachment relationship to their child. A continuing bond may manifest through sensing the presence of the deceased, maintaining the deceased's possessions, searching for the deceased, mistaking a person in a crowd for the deceased, hearing the deceased's voice, smelling the deceased's perfume or cologne, visiting the gravesite, recalling positive memories of the deceased, creating a legacy in memory of the deceased, visiting places the deceased once frequented, talking to the deceased, and identification with the deceased. Continuing bonds are frequently referred to as

affectionate bonds and retaining or maintaining bonds (Field et al., 2005; Klass, 2006; Klass et al., 1996).

***Grief.*** The subjective experience of having lost a loved one to death (Kagawa-Singer, 1994; Worden, 2002)

***Mourning.*** The social process or expression of loss that one experiences (Kagawa-Singer, 1994; Worden, 2002).

***New parent-child connections.*** This term refers to the changes that the parent-child attachment undergoes after death and is the phenomenon being investigated. The underlying structures inherent in this new parent-child relationship reflect the transcendental properties of the parent-child attachment system (Field, 2006b; Klass, 2006).

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

A number of assumptions can be identified on a methodological and theoretical level that may have biased the findings of the present research study. First, it was assumed that research participants had reached a comfortable level in their grieving process that would allow them to engage in in-depth interviews regarding their bereavement experiences. A second assumption was that these participants had a connection to or relationship with their deceased children and that their descriptions of these experiences would be accurate. Third, it was assumed that the research participants possessed the cognitive and linguistic ability to articulate their bereavement experiences and the development of post-death connections with their children. The final assumption was that the researcher's presence did not unduly influence bereaved parents' narratives and their reflections upon their present connections with their deceased children.

The current research accepted the philosophical assumptions of constructivism that (a) knowledge is derived from the collaborative interactions between researchers and participants; (b) subjective interpretations of the world are important; (c) multiple views of reality exist; and (d) the predispositions and experiences of researchers and how these biases may unduly influence the direction and results of the present study.

The fundamental assumption of attachment theory is that attachments formed during infancy between parents and children act as templates for the formation of future attachment relationships. The quality of attachments is based on parental responsiveness, physical proximity, and the level of security felt by children. Children form internal working models or mental representations of attachment figures to alleviate, or at least manage anxiety in the absence of their parents (Bowlby, 1980). Depending on the quality of the attachments, children may experience extreme forms of distress upon relinquishing their attachments, or being momentarily separated from their parents. Bowlby (1980) postulated that children will go through three phases: protest, despair, and reorganization of the attachment relationship. These three phases serve as an evolutionary and survival mechanism to facilitate adjustment and separation from attachment figures.

The research study was based on a sample of 10 bereaved parents who had lost adolescent children aged 10 to 21 years to suicide. The findings from the current study may be limited in their transferability to other bereaved populations beyond the selected sample and may not be applicable to those parents who have lost children to non-suicide related causes (i.e., illness, accident, or homicide). Further, parental descriptions of the bereavement experience and the meaning of their post-loss relationship may vary significantly depending on cultural and religious backgrounds. A focus on the religious,

spiritual, or cultural dimension in the development and establishment of new parent-child attachments was beyond the scope of this study. Depending on the age of children at death, bereaved parents who lose adult children to suicide may differ in their grief reactions and development of post-death connections compared to those parents who lose adolescent children.

### **Chapter 1. Summary**

The suicide death of children represents a traumatic and ineffable experience in the lives of parents. The traumatic nature of adolescent suicide shakes the foundation on which parenthood exists and shatters many of the basic assumptions held by parents. As parents learn to rebuild their lives, a formidable challenge of maintaining attachment bonds with their deceased children emerges. Research in this area has employed quantitative designs and focused on the adaptive and maladaptive nature of continuing bonds, stigmatization of suicide, social support systems, parental identities, adjustment styles, and risk and protective factors. This study addresses the gap in the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of bereaved parents and their attachment relationships with their deceased children. A transcendental phenomenological design was used to explore, describe, and understand bereaved parents experience establishing and maintaining connections with their deceased children.

### **Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

The sections of this study are structured and organized based on Capella University's Dissertation Manual for Doctoral Researchers. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the background and nature of the problem being investigated. A general overview of the problem statement, purpose and relevance of the study, research

question, assumptions and limitations, and terms commonly used in the study are provided. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical orientation, attachment theory, and the essential components of this model. A comprehensive review of the literature on continuing bonds and relinquishing bonds within an attachment theory framework follows, indicating a need for additional qualitative research. Chapter 3 presents an overview of qualitative research with an emphasis on transcendental phenomenology. The principles and philosophical assumptions of transcendental phenomenology are discussed and Moustakas' phenomenological model is explained. Furthermore, this chapter presents a detailed description of participant selection, methodological procedures, researcher as instrument, data analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the research findings from data analysis and the constituents of participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon being investigated. These findings are presented in textural and structural descriptions for each participant that were developed from the meaning units extrapolated from participant interviews. A synthesis of participants' textural and structural descriptions concludes this chapter. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the results, conclusions, and recommendations for future research. The research findings are discussed within the theoretical orientation and the current research. The meanings or essences of participants' experience with the phenomenon are provided. Study limitations, practical implications, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction to the Literature Review**

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the bereavement literature with attention to the emergence of continuing bond expressions and the role that these bonds have on bereavement-related adjustment. This review begins with an overview of attachment theory and a discussion of the central components related to forming and maintaining attachment bonds. A discussion of attachment theory within the context of bereavement follows with a focus on the controversy surrounding the theory of continuing versus relinquishing bonds. Four themes related to continuing bonds are identified and reviewed. The research question being investigated in this phenomenological study is: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?”

The bereavement literature is expansive in both depth and breadth on the trajectory of parental grief across the life cycle and the systemic properties surrounding the suicide death of children. This research has focused on the etiology of suicide bereavement, the role of protective and risk factors on suicide-related adjustment, and the long-term effects of suicide on surviving family members and friends. A substantial amount of this empirical research has found a strong relationship between the death of children and an increased risk for bereaved parents to experience greater grief difficulties, strained relationships (Feigelman et al., 2009), marital problems (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2005) stigmatization (Thrift & Coyle, 2005), familial problems (Barlow & Coleman, 2003), depression, poorer well-being, and other mental health problems (Rogers et al., 2008).

While a proliferation of quantitative methodologies have been employed throughout the bereavement literature, contemporary researchers have given more attention to the lived experiences of bereaved parents and their personal journeys through grief and bereavement by utilizing qualitative and mixed methodologies (Lindqvist et al., 2008; Ronen, Packman, Field, Davies, Kramer, & Long, 2009-2010; Klass et al., 1996). This literature review includes a synthesis and evaluation of contemporary bereavement research on the topics of suicide bereavement as experienced by bereaved parents and the phenomenon of continuing bonds. The latter of these is discussed within an attachment theory framework to illuminate the importance of parent-child relationships after death. This literature review demonstrates the need for additional qualitative research that has been previously identified in the literature (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Miers et al., 2012) and expands upon the phenomenon of continuing bonds expressions (Klass, 2006). Addressing these concerns through qualitative research can provide practitioners, scholars, and researchers with a better understanding of the unique and complex nature of parent-child relationships after adolescent suicide and contributes to the development of appropriate therapeutic interventions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Attachment theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the unique and enduring quality of parent-child relationships after death and offers clinicians a distinct avenue for understanding the profound grief reactions experienced by bereaved parents. According to this theoretical orientation, attachment bonds represent a set of systematic and goal-oriented behaviors for the purpose of establishing physical proximity between children and their attachment figures, or parents (Bowlby, 1980). These

systematic behaviors engender feelings of security and comfort through the regulation of physical contact and closeness between children and attachment figures. If these attachment figures are absent or are perceived as unavailable, children will search for their missing figure and behave in distinct ways to elicit responses from their parents. During periods of separation, children are likely to experience feelings of anger, anxiety, and distress as they attempt to recover their lost attachment figures (Bowlby, 1979).

Despite the duration of separation, the parent-child attachment bond has been described as enduring. Hooyman and Kramer (2008) explained that the enduring nature of the attachment bond can be found in its persistence and longevity, despite the temporality (e.g., the parent in another room) or permanence (e.g., death) of the separation. Whether or not the attachment figure's absence elicits positive or negative emotions may depend on their *perceived* availability (Field et al., 2005). For bereaved parents, as long as deceased children are *perceived* to be available and recoverable, they are more likely to experience feelings of comfort, security, and safety. If, on the other hand, deceased children are perceived to be lost and irrecoverable, these parents may experience feelings of anger, anxiety, and extreme distress. Bereaved parents may engage in search behaviors to alleviate their distress and reestablish physical proximity to their deceased children. These search behaviors offer parents concrete strategies for recovering their deceased children and strengthening affectionate bonds with them (Bowlby, 1979, 1980). Searching for deceased children and yearning for their return necessitates a deep understanding and appreciation of bereaved parents' internal working models, the attachment behavioral systems, and Bowlby's three stage model of separation.

Bowlby (1979, 1980) recognized search behaviors as the activation of innate biological mechanisms that are responsible for two distinct functions: (a) reestablishing physical proximity to attachment figures, and (b) strengthening affectionate bonds between parents and children. Attachment bonds between parents and children are formed primarily during infancy and are predominately influenced by the quality of the environment and the responsiveness of parents to their infants' needs (Bowlby, 1973). Children whose parents are responsive and that are raised in environments that promote safety, security, warmth, acceptance, and physical closeness are more likely to develop healthy attachment bonds with their parents. When children are exposed to environments filled with inconsistency, negativity, disapproval, and distance from primary attachment figures, the development of unhealthy attachment bonds are prominent (Bowlby, 1973). While a discussion on the various attachments styles are beyond the scope of the research study, researchers have acknowledged the significance of these styles in the attachment literature (Shaver & Tancredy, 2001) and their contributions to the bereavement literature (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2007).

The cornerstones of attachment theory are availability of attachments figures and establishing physical proximity to them. Bowlby (1980) argued that attachment figures serve as reference points in the external world, providing children with safe havens from which to return after exploring the natural world. Researchers have defined safe havens as those primary attachment figures who elicit feelings of safety, security, and reassurance in their children (Field et al., 2005), enabling them to return to their attachment figures during moments of distress. As safe havens, parents play a monumental role in promoting or discouraging children's natural tendencies to explore

their environments. When parents are unresponsive to their children's needs and convey feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and distrust, children experience fear, confusion, and lack of confidence in their caregivers and develop insecure attachments with their parents. On the other hand, parents who are responsive and convey safety, trust, and openness in their interactions with their children are more likely to develop secure parent-child attachments (Bowlby, 1973). Additionally, the affectionate bond that forms between infant and parent become fundamental for the development of future relationships to others, the world, and to oneself. For both caregiver and infant, these affectionate bonds are externalized, in the form of behaviors, and internalized as mental representations.

### **Internal Working Models**

The concept of an internal working model is predicated on the idea that human beings learn to develop cognitive representations of their loved ones that reflect the quality and nature of the affectionate bond. The purpose of the internal working model is to create mental images that can be cognitively recalled or experienced, particularly during periods of separation. These mental images encompass feelings, thoughts, ideas, and expectations of both parents and children (Bowlby, 1980). These complex cognitive models may elicit feelings of comfort, security, and safety, or feelings of anxiety, confusion, and distress, depending on the attachment figures perceived availability and the nature of the parent-child bond (Field et al., 2005).

Bowlby (1980) described the internal working model as a complex cognitive process that can be activated at any time and includes distinct attributes of the self, world, attachment figure, and those expectations held about the attachment figure. For instance,

parents may hold mental pictures of their children as reliable and autonomous human beings, even though their children may be physically absent. However, if the children fail to fulfill their parent's expectations, they may no longer be considered consistent and independent. In the case of children's death, bereaved parents are confronted with the challenge of restructuring their internal working models to reflect the absence of their children in the external world. This change in bereaved parents' mental pictures of their children highlights the complex and dynamic nature of the internal working model (Bowlby, 1980), implying that mental representations are continually being revised and redefined as new information emerges. This cognitive transformation process of the internal working model has clinical implications for bereavement practitioners, and researchers have identified this process as an essential variable in moderating grief-related reactions among bereaved populations (Field, 2006b; Field et al., 2005; Field & Filanosky, 2010). For instance, failure to work through the emotional pain of child death and reconstruct the internal working model to reflect a world in which the deceased is absent, while simultaneously continuing the bond, has been associated with unresolved loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2008).

### **Attachment Behavior System**

Internal working models act as a template for the formation of future relationships with significant others and are intricately related to the functions of the attachment behavioral system (Bowlby, 1973). As mentioned earlier, people hold mental representations of their loved ones as being either accessible and responsive or unavailable and despondent. Depending on the mental representations of the loved ones as either dependable and available or inaccessible and insensitive, people will respond in

distinct manners to any perceived threats, real or imagined, that may jeopardize the affectionate bonds. Once threats are detected, the attachment behavioral system is activated, initiating a biological set of organized behaviors aimed toward reestablishing and maintaining the attachment bond with their loved ones (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). For bereaved parents, death signals the termination of the affectionate bond, prompting parents to engage in exhaustive search efforts to reestablish physical proximity to their deceased children.

Bowlby (1980) posited that the attachment behavior system evokes intense emotion during periods of formation, maintenance, disruption, and the renewal of affectionate bonds. During periods of actual or perceived separation, bereaved parents are likely to experience intense anxiety, anger, depression, fear, and even rapprochement as they vigorously attempt to reclaim proximity to their deceased children (Bowlby, 1973). Bowlby (1973, 1980) believed that attachment behavior was teleological, or goal oriented toward reestablishing the affectionate bond between parents and their dependent children. This motivation to reclaim proximity to the attachment figure is manifested through the attachment behavioral system in one of three ways: protest, despair, and detachment.

### **Protest, Despair, and Detachment**

Initially, this triadic model of separation was developed to explain the variation in children's responses to parental separation; however, this model can be adapted to understand parental response to their children's deaths. After discovering that one's child has died, bereaved parents commonly respond with protest, refusing to accept the reality of the child's death. This first stage is commonly characterized by clinging behavior, anger, excessive crying, defiant outbursts, and other behaviors aimed toward reclaiming

the presence of the deceased child (Bowlby, 1973, 1980). After many failed attempts to reestablish physical proximity to their deceased children, bereaved parents enter Bowlby's second stage, despair. Plagued by the profound depths of despair, bereaved parents become depressed and preoccupied with resuming the attachment bond prior to the loss, culminating in a period of yearning for their deceased children's return and searching for their presence.

Eventually, bereaved parents experience detachment, the last stage of the attachment behavior system. Detachment involves the complex process of withdrawing the emotional energy invested in their deceased children's return and abandoning the hope of reestablishing the pre-loss attachment relationship. Consequently, the internal working model of bereaved parents must adapt and accommodate their deceased children and the finality of the separation by reorganizing itself to accept that the loss is final and irreparable. Contemporary bereavement models have recognized that the cognitive restructuring process of parents' mental representation of their deceased children does not involve a complete emotional detachment (Klass et al., 1996). Rather, bereaved parents must learn to reorganize their mental representations of their deceased children to reflect new variations of their attachment relationships, namely ones that are no longer based on physical proximity but on psychological proximity (Field, 2006b; Field et al., 2005).

The manifestations of protest, despair, and detachment have symbolic reference to the grieving process and the intense parental reactions associated with learning that their children have died from suicide. Bowlby (1980) distinguished between healthy, successful mourning and pathological or complicated mourning by bereaved persons' abilities to accept their losses and move forward. Contrary to traditional models of grief,

moving forward does not involve relinquishing or terminating bonds, but rather transforming bonds from relationships existing in the external world to internal attachments (Bowlby, 1980; Field, 2006b). Internal relationships may contain properties that are similar to external relationships because they are acquired through psychological proximity, thereby satisfying similar attachment needs and functions. Establishing psychological proximity to attachment figures involves cognitive abilities and processes required to reshape bereaved persons' internal working models of the deceased as no longer existing in the external world.

### **Mourning and Attachment Theory**

Mourning has been conceptualized in the literature as the process in which bereaved persons adapt to loss (Worden, 2002). A closer examination of this process has generated a rich discussion on the bereavement experiences and the theoretical models that have been developed to explain the mourning process. According to attachment theory, mourning includes the psychological processes experienced by bereaved persons as they adapt to a changed environment. For bereaved parents, the death of a child elicits profound psychological reactions that may be described as disorganized insofar as bereaved parents struggle to accommodate a world that no longer contains the deceased. Drawing on the research of bereaved spouses, Bowlby (1979, 1980) illustrated the profound emotional and behavioral responses that comprise the trajectory of mourning in a four-phase model: (a) initial phase of numbing, (b) yearning and searching behaviors, (c) disorganization and despair, and (d) reorganization.

Discovering that a child has died engenders a range of intense and confusing emotions that may be difficult for bereaved parents to identify and describe to family and

friends. Once bereaved parents face the reality of their children's death, they often experience an initial feeling of numbness that can last several hours to a week (Bowlby, 1980). Often described as an inability to process or accept the news of the death, emotional numbness is a powerful feeling that may preclude bereaved parents from completely grasping the permanence of the loss. Bowlby (1980) explained that the evanescent feeling of numbness may occur intermittently throughout the course of the day and may be interrupted by the onset of unpredictable emotional outbursts. For example, one of the most common and normal grief-related responses to death is anger (Worden, 2002). Grief, however, is not restricted to emotional responses but can also be experienced physically, cognitively, and behaviorally. On a physical level, bereaved parents may experience restlessness, appetite disturbances, crying, sleeplessness, and absentmindedness. Behaviorally, bereaved parents may call out to the deceased, visit places that remind parents of the deceased, or avoid reminders altogether (Worden, 2002). Further, bereaved parents are likely to experience feelings of profound tearfulness, anger, agitation, apprehensiveness, and fear (Bowlby, 1980). These emotional outbursts can be exacerbated during periods of minimal stress or pressure and may be perceived by family and friends as abnormal or irrational.

After the initial numbness subsides, bereaved parents gradually enter Bowlby's (1980) second phase of mourning, yearning and searching. This second phase of mourning is characterized by intense periods of pining and active efforts to search for the deceased child (Bowlby, 1980). As bereaved parents are confronted with the reality of their child's death, these parents experience overwhelming emotional, physical, and psychological pain that can lead to complicated grief or interfere with their desire to

continue the parent-child bond. As the death of a child and the breaking of the attachment bond becomes a conscious experience for bereaved parents, the acceptance of the parent-child separation may be episodic and interwoven with a renewed sense of hope that the deceased child will return (Bowlby, 1980). Research on the adaptive nature of parental search behavior throughout the course of bereavement has been mixed (Stroebe & Schut, 2005), yet researchers have concluded that the specific time following the death may be an essential element in determining the adaptiveness or maladaptiveness of search behaviors (Field et al., 2005).

The prolonged engagement in parental search efforts to locate the deceased child often becomes disorganized over time. As hopelessness eventually sets in, bereaved parents enter the third phase of mourning, disorganization and despair (Bowlby, 1980). According to attachment theory, initial search-related behaviors constitute a normal experience in the grieving process; however, the continuation of search-related behaviors over an extended period of time may be indicative of maladaptive or complicated grief responses (Bowlby, 1973, 1980; Field et al., 2005). For example, research on spousal bereavement has found that search-related behaviors may continue for surviving spouses, even five years after the death of a partner (Field et al., 2003). Therefore, continued attachment post-loss may be maladaptive under certain conditions and reflect a failure to successfully integrate the loss into the bereaved person's mental scheme (Bowlby, 1980; Field, 2006b).

By searching for deceased figures, bereaved persons are able to temporarily compartmentalize the despair otherwise experienced when attention is given to the loss. Thus, searching behavior can serve a vital function in protecting bereaved persons from

the emotional and psychological pain associated with the death of a loved one and defending against the permanence of the separation (Field, 2006b). Drawing on the research of Parks, Bowlby (1980) identified a number of search-related behaviors: (a) examining the environment for the deceased person's presence, (b) becoming preoccupied with thoughts about the deceased, (c) calling out for the deceased, (d) cultivating a disposition to perceive specific environmental cues as evidence of the deceased person's presence while minimizing evidence to the contrary, and (e) becoming attuned only to those areas of the environment that confirm bereaved persons disposition. These examples of search-related behaviors have been illustrated in the literature as (a) mistaking the faces of other children in public as the deceased child, (b) visiting places once frequented by the deceased, (c) misperceiving sounds as indicators that the deceased child has returned, (d) maintaining the deceased child's possessions, and (e) hallucinations of the deceased child (Field, 2006b; Field et al., 2005; Ronen et al, 2009-2010; Taylor, 2005). Further, bereaved persons have reported experiencing post-death encounters through sensory perceptions, such as smelling the perfume once worn by the deceased, seeing visual images of the deceased, hearing the deceased person's voice, or feeling the presence of the deceased (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009; Taylor, 2005).

The process of redefining oneself and the attachment relationship constitutes the final phase of mourning known as reorganization. Bowlby (1980) described the reorganization phase as a complex cognitive task that involves a transformation of the bereaved person's internal working model to reflect the external changes in the attachment relationship. In other words, bereaved persons have to cognitively relocate the deceased in order to achieve psychological proximity. Researchers have written

extensively about the importance of modifying the internal working model to accommodate changes in the external environment and to reflect the internalization of the attachment relationship (Field, et al., 2005; Field & Filanosky, 2010; Ronen et al., 2009-2010).

## **Review of the Critical Literature**

### **Continuing Bonds: An Introduction**

The phenomenon of continuing bonds as a fundamental element of grief and bereavement was first introduced by Klass et al. (1996) in their influential book, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. In their book, these authors defined continuing bonds as the ongoing, internal connections held by bereaved persons for the purpose of maintaining the attachment relationship to the deceased. This postmodern perspective on the relationship between bereavement-related adjustment and continuing bonds is antithetical to classical grief models that discouraged and identified continuing bonds as disturbed and pathological (Hooyman & Kramer, 2008). Klass and his colleagues, however, have advanced scientific understanding of the complex phenomenon known as continuing bonds and its relationship with bereavement adjustment by opening a dialogue that reexamines the ontological and epistemological tenets of traditional grief models (Klass, 2006; Klass et al., 1996). By introducing the phenomenon of continuing bonds, these researchers have challenged Western world views that identify post-death attachment to the deceased as pathological. This paradigm shift has received enormous attention across the disciplines of counseling, psychology, sociology, and theology (Field et al, 2003; Owens et al., 2008; Parker, 2005; Taylor, 2005) and has created controversy on the adaptive nature of continuing bonds in the

facilitation of healthy adjustment to grief (Schut, Stroebe, Boelen, & Zijerveld, 2006; Stroebe et al., 2010). This review begins with a description of continuing bonds, the function that continuing bonds serve in grief and bereavement, and the ongoing debate among scholars on the adaptive nature of continuing bond expressions. From this review, a need for a stronger knowledge base on the development and establishment of parent-child relationship that survive death emerges. The scientific studies reviewed underscore the growing need for phenomenological research that highlights the lived experiences of bereaved parents and how parents maintain a relationship with their adolescent children following suicide.

Given the wide variety of continuing bond expressions and the different circumstances that such bonds manifest, it is understandable that much controversy exists over this phenomenon. Therefore, it is important to understand what types of continuing bond expressions facilitate healthy grief adjustment, to whom such bonds incite successful adaptation, and under what circumstances do continuing bond expressions promote positive grief-related psychological adjustment among bereaved parents. To accomplish this, a brief overview of continuing bond expressions within an attachment theory framework is provided to highlight the intense distress reactions experienced by bereaved persons upon separation from attachment figures. Following this review, the controversy surrounding the phenomenon of continuing versus relinquishing bonds are examined and clinical implications are provided.

### **Continuing and Relinquishing Bonds**

The controversy over the adaptive and maladaptive properties of continuing versus relinquishing bonds has emerged in the twenty-first century literature as a

fundamental concern for bereavement scholars, researchers, and practitioners. Scholars have argued that continuing bonds serve a vital function in bereavement adjustment and that such bonds are believed to comprise a normative course of bereavement (Klass et al., 1996; Parker, 2005). In contrast, other researchers have contended that continuing bonds with the deceased, regardless of its various manifestations, increase grief-specific symptom patterns among the bereaved, thereby interfering with healthy grief resolution (Field et al., 2003). More recently, researchers have attempted to ameliorate the ongoing debate in the bereavement literature over the adaptive functioning of continuing bond expressions by categorizing these bond manifestations into externalized and internalized variants (Field & Filanosky, 2010). The separation of continuing bonds based on internal and external properties has advanced scholarly discourse on the nature and development of continuing bonds across the life-cycle. Nevertheless, the disagreement over the continuing versus relinquishing bond hypothesis continues to permeate the bereavement literature as scholars and practitioners advocate for further conceptual development and theoretical integration over this controversial phenomenon (Stroebe et al., 2010).

Distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive variants of continuing bond expressions presents numerous methodological and conceptual challenges. Quantitative research in this area has produced mixed results (Boelen et al., 2006; Foster et al., 2011; Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006), indicating that continuing bond expressions are a complex and diverse phenomenon in the lives of bereaved persons that may not be fully explained through quantitative measures. Given the limitations of quantitative research, qualitative designs have been introduced as a method for exploring and describing the transformation of parent-child relationships after the deaths of children. Through

qualitative designs, researchers are able to provide a deeper appreciation and understanding of the unique properties of parent-child relationships post-death and how parents feel, think, understand, perceive, and are influenced by these new connections.

As an emerging phenomenon, continuing bonds has received considerable attention in the bereavement literature as essential components in grief-related psychological adjustment. Researchers exploring the traumatic nature of children's deaths on suicide-related bereavement experiences of parents have employed a diverse range of qualitative methodologies, including case studies (Ronen et al., 2009-2010), phenomenology (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009; Taylor, 2005; Thrift & Coyle, 2005; Woodgate, 2006), grounded theory (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Lindqvist et al., 2008; Sanger, 2008-2009), narrative analysis (Maple, Plummer, Edwards, & Minichiello, 2007; Maple et al., 2010), and qualitative-interpretative methods (Toller, 2005, 2008). The implementation of the diverse range of qualitative methodologies has provided insight into the subjective experiences of parents and the meaning of continuing bonds in the lives of bereaved parents. Klass et al. (1996) posited that this paradigm shift away from quantitative methodologies and toward qualitative research will advance scientific understanding of the relationship between continuing bonds and suicide bereavement throughout the bereavement process for bereaved persons, in general, and for bereaved parents, in particular.

### **Remembering Deceased Children**

The desire of bereaved persons to continue their attachment relationships post-loss and ensure that their deceased loved ones are remembered have been recognized in the literature as a prominent theme that has significant implications for both scholars and

practitioners. In a qualitative study, Woodgate (2006) used a phenomenological design to explore the experiences of bereaved parents transitioning through the death of their children and living in a world without closure. Twenty-eight bereaved parents, 17 mothers and 11 fathers, were interviewed between 7 months and 18 years following the death of their children. Data was collected through in-depth, open-ended interviews and analyzed using Van Manen's selective highlighting approach until themes that captured participants' experiences were identified. Four themes emerged from these interviews: (a) keeping the memories alive, (b) being good parents, (c) being present at the time of death, and (d) being there for me after my child dies.

Woodgate (2006) related the first theme, keeping the memories alive, to the phenomenon of continuing bonds. She found that memories of deceased children were elicited from the recollection of common parent-child activities or events experienced pre-loss and through the use of objects, articles, or pictures of sentimental value. For these parents, keeping the memories of their children alive served as methods of maintaining attachments with their children and helped them live in a world without closure. These special and private internal connections symbolize the creation of ongoing, internal bonds with deceased children that researchers have associated with personal growth and successful bereavement adaptation (Field & Filanosky, 2010). Bereaved parents in Woodgate's (2006) study reported creating special rituals or new objects to strengthen their connections with their deceased children and to keep their memories alive. The creation of rituals and objects served as reminders for parents that allowed them to re-experience their attachments with their deceased children.

Although Woodgate's (2006) findings are significant, the implications of the study are limited to those parents who lost children to medical complications or life-threatening illnesses between the ages of 3 days and 23 years. The exclusion of suicide-bereaved parents from the study raises the question of whether the healing properties associated with recalling memories are applicable to bereaved parents who lose children to suicide. Additional research is needed to understand the healing nature of recalling memories of deceased children within suicide bereavement and the implications that these memories have on parent-child connections following adolescent suicide.

In an attempt to address the limitations of Woodgate's (2006) study, researchers have explored the lived experiences of bereaved parents who have lost adult children to suicide. Maple et al. (2010) employed a qualitative-narrative design to understand how bereaved parents lived through and with the suicide death of their adult children. Twenty-two parents who lost adult children aged 17 to 31 years participated, of which included 16 mothers, 6 fathers, 1 step-parent, and 1 foster parent. The length of time since the death of children ranged from 6 months to 26 years. Data was collected through face-to-face in-depth, open-ended interviews with the exception of one telephone interview. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Data was analyzed using a three-tiered strategy that involved reviewing transcripts for shared and unique experiences, identifying the meaning participant's ascribed to their experiences, and comparing the meanings derived from the data with social norms.

Findings from Maple et al. (2010) study indicate that bereaved parents do experience various manifestations of continuing bond expressions and that these bonds may emerge within a social context. There was a profound desire among bereaved

parents to talk about and share their personal experiences losing children to suicide and the continued connections they have with their deceased children. Parents reported that remembering their children and keeping them as a central aspect of their lives were essential for surviving the suicidal death of their children and journeying through the intense feelings of grief and bereavement. While memories were an important element for maintaining connections to their children, these parents did not feel comfortable reflecting on and sharing positive memories of their deceased children with others. Maple et al. (2010) described this phenomenon as silenced voices to describe the emotional difficulty that parents experienced when they wanted to share the positive memories and happy moments of their children. This finding has been supported in the research on social communication among bereaved persons. Toller (2005, 2008) referred to this phenomenon as a dialectical contradiction that reflected the views that parents have of themselves as being an inside-outside without children to parent.

### **Internalizing Deceased Children**

Another continuing bond expression that has received considerable attention in the bereavement literature is the integration of deceased children into the life narratives of bereaved parents. This internalizing process is recognized as a complex and psychological integration of those qualities, traits, and characteristics associated with deceased children in such a way that parents use these attributes as a moral compass for future decision making (Field et al., 2005; Klass et al., 1996). In a 2007 phenomenological study, Begley and Quayle (2007) explored the lived experiences of eight adult suicide survivors in order to understand the uniqueness of suicide bereavement and the challenges associated with recovering from the loss of family

members to suicide. Half of the participants were bereaved parents that lost children aged 18 to 23 to suicide. The researchers developed an interview guide based on their review of the literature. This guide was open-ended in nature for the purpose of eliciting participants' thoughts and feelings pertaining to the suicide, their relationship with the deceased, and the impact that their loved ones death has had on them. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed for data analysis. An interpretive phenomenological model was used for analyzing the data and identifying themes across participant interviews. Four master themes emerged: (a) controlling the impact of the suicide, (b) making sense of the suicide, (c) social uneasiness, and (d) purposefulness.

Begley and Quayle (2007) noted that only the latter of these themes—purposefulness—was related to the phenomenon of continuing bonds, or what they called “magical attachments” to deceased loved ones (p.31). These adults expressed a strong desire to continue their attachment relationships to their deceased loved ones and attributed both significant and insignificant events in their lives to the continued involvement of their lost loved ones. Begley and Quayle (2007) described this continued attachment post-loss as a “mental bond” that allowed the deceased to remain an intricate part of their life, particularly in regards to decision-making, developing new ideas, reinvesting in life, and day-to-day tasks (p.31). The unwillingness of bereaved adults to relinquish their attachments to their deceased loved ones supports the continuing bond hypothesis proposed by Klass and his colleagues (Klass, 2006; Klass et al., 1996).

While there has been considerable debate over the adaptiveness of continuing bonds in the bereavement literature (Field, 2006b; Stroebe & Schut, 2005), researchers have implemented mixed methodologies to investigate the relationship between

continuing bonds and grief-related adjustment among bereaved parents. Ronen et al. (2009-2010) examined 48 parents' continuing bond expressions, grief reactions, and psychological adjustment after losing children to medical causes. Parents over the age of 18 and that had lost children younger than 18 years old were eligible to participate in the study. All parents completed the Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG), Continuing Bonds Interview (CBI), and two projective drawings that were evaluated by a certified and registered art therapist. These drawings depicted how parents visualized their children today and how parents' lives have changed since the death of their children. The authors selected six bereaved parents with similar themes across projective drawings and that possessed the highest and lowest ICG scores to represent the entire sample. These six parents were divided into two groups, a non-complicated and a complicated grief group, and were presented as case studies to illustrate the continuing bond expressions, grief reactions, and grief-related adjustment.

Two themes emerged across participants in the non-complicated grief group. First, parents in this group reported comforting experiences associated with internalizing their deceased children and were able to strongly identify with them. These parents described their children as a positive influence and presence in their lives. Second, the non-complicated group scored relatively low on the ICG and qualitative data from the CBI indicated that bereaved parents had a more successful adaptation to loss compared to those parents in the complicated grief group. Contrary to the non-complicated group, parents in the complicated grief group reported more severe grief reactions and described their memories and presence of their deceased children as intrusive, overwhelming, and distressing. For whatever reason, these parents were unable or unwilling to internalize

positive qualities of their deceased children. The authors concluded that bereaved parents are more likely to experience healthier adjustment and adaptation to loss if they are able to identify meaning in their loss, internalize positive qualities of their deceased children, and incorporate the values and ideals of their children (Ronen et al., 2009-2010). These findings are consistent with Begley and Quayle's (2005) research that found adults bereaved from suicide were able to heal and survive from the deaths of their loved ones if they were able to make sense of the suicide and discover purpose in their lives.

### **Post-Death Encounters**

Research on continuing bond expressions have identified another form of attachment bond experienced by bereaved persons, namely post-death encounters. Klugman (2006) defined post-death encounters as bereaved person's experience and belief that their deceased loved ones are trying to make contact with them. Researchers have explored the meaning that bereaved persons ascribe to post-death encounters and the transformative nature of these experiences on their attitudes and beliefs about death and the afterlife (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009). Employing a phenomenological framework, Nowatzki and Kalischuk (2009) interviewed 23 bereaved individuals, 18 women and 5 men, which had experienced after-death encounters with loved ones between 9 months and 40 years prior to the interview. The majority of participants were Caucasian ( $n = 19$ ), Christian ( $n = 19$ ), and had reportedly lost a spouse ( $n = 10$ ). Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences with post-death encounters, the impact of these encounters on their spiritual and religious beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, and whether or not these participants shared their experiences with others. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim for hermeneutic-phenomenological data analysis.

Interviews transcripts were compared for common themes and subthemes. Participants predominately reported auditory and visual encounters with the deceased followed by sensing the deceased person's presence. Consistent with previous research (Daggett, 2005; Parker, 2005; Ronen et al., 2009-2010), many of the participants described these experiences as comforting, peaceful, loving, warm, and connected to their loved one. Other forms of continuing bond expressions that were reported include a vivid sense of the deceased person's presence, dreams of the deceased, and tactile and olfactory encounters with the deceased. For many participants, these encounters conveyed a sense of reassurance that the deceased was okay and an opportunity to say goodbye.

Another positive theme identified by Nowatzki and Kalischuk (2009) was the supportive and instructional nature of post-death encounters, particularly during times of personal struggles or indecisiveness. The belief that deceased loved ones guide, support, encourage, and assist bereaved persons' after death is a consistent theme in the continuing bond research (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Klugman, 2006; Ronen et al., 2009-2010). Field (2006b) explained that the death of children necessitates a major revision of bereaved parents' mental schemes and their attachment bonds shared with their children. This transformation of parent-child attachments highlights the complex and psychological process of internalizing deceased children in order to establish psychological proximity to them. Once deceased children have been internalized, they serve as secure bases for parents to communicate with about daily problems, life issues, and decision making (Field, 2006b; Field et al., 2005).

In addition, Nowatzki and Kalischuk (2009) discovered that post-death encounters can have a transformative effect on bereaved survivors attitudes and beliefs about life,

death, and the afterlife. Many participants described their post-death encounters as a special connection with their deceased loved ones that encouraged them to embrace life, face challenges, live in the moment, and appreciate the value of human relationships. Further, these encounters strengthened participant's convictions that connections with deceased loved ones can survive death and that these continuing bonds do have positive and therapeutic effects on the healing process.

To illustrate the normality of continuing bond expressions in the lives of bereaved individuals, Klugman (2006) conducted a random telephone survey that was administered by telephone to 202 bereaved individuals that had lost loved ones to death between 1 month and 56 years. The death history interview was developed from the author's dissertation research and based on his findings from two focus groups. The interview consisted of 81 closed-ended questions that inquired about visions, smells, sounds, actions, and associations made by bereaved persons in relation to post-death encounters. Participants were randomly selected from a telephone book and were required to be over 18 years old. The majority of participants were bereaved children ( $n = 50$ ) with a small minority of participants being bereaved parents ( $n = 4$ ). Quantitative data collected from these interviews were inputted and analyzed using SPSS.

Findings from Klugman's (2006) study indicated that post-death encounters are more common directly after the death of loved ones, and that these encounters continue over time. Klugman (2006) explained that while post-death encounters may diminish in frequency with time, such encounters do not completely disappear. In fact, many participants reported continued contact with their deceased loved ones many years after the death, regardless of their relationship to the deceased and the mode of death. This

suggests that post-death contact is not limited to a specific type of bereavement and that contact with the deceased can persist many years after bereavement.

### **Parental Identity**

The devastation of child loss on parental adjustment often leaves bereaved parents feeling isolated and estranged from their support networks. The bereavement literature attributes the social discomfort experienced by bereaved parents to the social stigma associated with suicide (Cerel et al., 2008; Miers et al., 2012). In the midst of their isolation, bereaved parents often experience an existential crisis at the core of their identities. In an effort to narrow the gap in the literature, Toller (2005) explored how bereaved parents resolve and communicate with others the paradox of continuing bonds with deceased children in spite of their children's physical absence. He termed this dilemma a dialectical contradiction to illuminate the presence of diametrically opposed feelings that may be experienced by bereaved parents when sharing with others the enduring, emotional bond. A qualitative-interpretative methodology was used to interview 16 parents on (a) whether or not parents should be open or closed with others about their loss, and (b) feeling the continued presence of deceased children despite their physical absence. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for data analysis. A modified version of Strauss and Corbin's constant-comparative analysis was used to develop categories and thematic patterns. Dialectical contradictions were deduced from the raw data and later subjected to open and axial coding.

The dialectical theme of feeling the continued presence of deceased children despite their physical absence was related to the phenomenon of continuing bonds and presented as a presence-absence contradiction. This dialectical contradiction was defined

as an intense desire among parents to continue their emotional bonds with their deceased children while simultaneously living in a world that does not acknowledge their children's physical existence. Woodgate (2006) described this phenomenon as living in a world without closure and explained that many bereaved parents do not want closure, especially if closure is defined as terminating their connections with their deceased children. Toller (2005) discovered that bereaved parents found meaning in the donning of sentimental objects, performance of rituals, and the creation of symbols to honor and remember deceased children (Toller, 2005). This illuminates the permanence of parent-child relationships after death and underscores the physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions of continuing bonds (Harper et al., 2011; Klass, 2006). Further, bereaved parents described their innate desires to continue bonds with their deceased children as necessary for promoting healthy adaptation to loss (Toller, 2005). While the findings from Toller's (2005) study are promising, only a small minority of bereaved parents included in the study lost children to suicide. Even though continuing bonds have been found to play a prominent role in parental grief and bereavement, the role of these bonds in suicide bereavement from the perspective of bereaved parents have not been fully explored and described.

Building on his earlier work, Toller (2008) examined how bereaved parents manage the changes in their identities when confronted with the existential themes of being an insider-outsider in their social relationships and being parents without children to parent. Adopting a qualitative-interpretive methodology, Toller (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews with 53 parents who lost children between 6 months and 29 years prior to the study. The age of children at death ranged from 0 to 42 years of age.

The mode of death varied substantially with only six parents bereaved from suicide. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed using a modified version of Strauss and Cobin's constant-comparative method. Open and Axial coding was used to categorize and establish thematic patterns.

The first theme that emerged from Toller's (2008) study was described as being an insider-outsider, particularly when parents included their deceased children into family celebrations, holidays, or every day events. The withdrawal of social support after the death of children became prominent during family rituals and ceremonies honoring the memory of their children or establishing creative ways to continue bonds with deceased children (Toller, 2008). For example, visits to the cemetery to maintain the grave of deceased children was a meaningful activity that provided bereaved parents with the opportunity to nurture and care for their deceased children. Klass (2006) noted that cemetery visits symbolizes the communal nature of continuing bonds and reflects the personal variations found in bereavement and mourning practices. By visiting deceased loved ones, bereaved persons are able to maintain and strengthen their bonds not only with the recent deceased but also those deceased members from previous generations.

The second theme, parents without children to parent, raises the fundamental question, "Do the roles and functions of parents remain after children die?" The physical absence of children precludes parents from interacting, teaching, nurturing, disciplining, and mentoring their children. Therefore, bereaved parents must learn new strategies of interacting with their deceased children that are both meaningful and salutary. By strengthening the memory of deceased children and developing creative ways to maintain parent-child bonds, bereaved parents learn to successfully integrate their children into

their social and inner worlds. Toller (2008) concluded that bereaved parents discovered the powerful and symbolic nature of rituals that served as strategies for continuing their relationships with their deceased children.

Toller's (2005, 2008) findings from his research on parental bereavement illustrates the magnitude that children's deaths have on bereaved parents' social networks, in general, and the foundations and meanings of parenthood, in particular. Thus, bereaved parents are confronted with the formidable task of discovering meaning in parenthood after the traumatic death of children. In an interpretative phenomenological study, Thrift and Coyle (2005) explored the psychological and social dimensions of maternal identity reconstruction in the lives of six mothers whose children died two years prior to suicide. All parents reported that they had lost children aged 16 years and older to suicide. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Findings from the research indicated that parents experienced persistent feelings of failure, negative distinctiveness, and social rejection. While maternal identity was the focus of Thrift and Coyle's research, many of the bereaved mothers reported a long term change in the nature of their parent-child relationships. Parents described this change as symbolic connections that helped them maintain their relationships with their deceased children and that that facilitated the reconstruction of their maternal identities. Even though these researchers did not provide an in-depth explanation of continuing bonds, the emergence and adaptiveness of continuing bonds is evident in the lives of these bereaved mothers.

## **Continuing Bonds: Conclusions**

Continuing bonds have emerged as a fundamental component in the grieving process, yet researchers continue to debate the adaptive nature of these bonds in the lives of bereaved persons. Field (2006a) described continuing bond expressions as an essential component to bereavement that may serve an adaptive function under certain conditions. Notwithstanding, the enactment of continuing bonds over time and the failure to establish a clear boundary between past and present attachments to the deceased may be indicative of maladaptive grief reactions (Field et al., 2003). Furthermore, the absence of suicide-bereaved parents in contemporary research has contributed to an expansive gap in the scientific community and a lack of understanding of the permanent nature of parent-child attachments. Researchers have advocated for additional qualitative studies to provide a clearer conception of the nature and function of parent-child relationships after death (Lindqvist et al., 2008; Miers et al., 2012; Schut et al., 2006).

Traditional researchers in the field of grief and bereavement have employed quantitative designs to investigate the incidence of continuing bond expressions among bereaved survivors. Scholars, however, have critiqued this method of scientific inquiry as being insufficient for understanding the development and essence of the continuing bond hypothesis (Klass et al., 1996; Boelen et al., 2006). Quantitative research has been largely inconclusive on the phenomenon of continuing bond expressions, and researchers have attributed this inconsistency to methodological limitations and conceptual overlap between assessments (Boelen et al., 2006; Field, 2006a; Schut et al., 2006). Likewise, researchers have criticized standard continuing bond measurements on the grounds that these instruments are invalid and confounded with other grief measurements (Field,

2006a). The limitations associated with quantitative methodologies provide an impetus for qualitative exploration into the complex entanglement of continuing bond expressions and adaptation to loss.

Only recently have bereavement researchers and scholars recognized the significant limitations of quantitative inquiry as a method for describing and exploring the unique and complex experience of grief and bereavement. Klass et al. (1996) posited that qualitative research, not quantitative, is fundamental for understanding, describing, and explaining the essence of continuing bonds in the lives of the bereaved. His rationale on the significance of qualitative inquiry is premised on the epistemological assumptions of constructivism, which espouses that subjective experiences are to be valued and appreciated as a legitimate form of scientific research (Creswell, 2007, 2009). Thus, the adoption of a qualitative framework can be advantageous for exploring the subjective experiences of parental bereavement and parent-child attachments post-loss. A qualitative design would provide researchers and scholars with knowledge obtained from the personal narratives of suicide-bereaved parents. Accordingly, bereavement researchers have advocated for the publication of additional research utilizing qualitative methodologies for the purpose of developing a better understanding of the meaning-making process and how bereaved persons maintain their attachment relationships with their deceased loved one (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Lindqvist et al., 2008).

### **Crucial Theoretical/Conceptual Debates**

Klass (2006) introduced the phenomenon of continuing bonds to describe the complex and permanent nature of parent-child attachments that continues post-death. The purpose of introducing continuing bonds, according to Klass (2006), was to open a

dialogue among professionals about the manifestations of continuing attachment expressions that such bonds have on the bereavement narratives of parents.

Notwithstanding, the introduction of continuing bonds in the bereavement literature has mistakenly lead to the misapplication and misunderstanding of this phenomenon. For instance, the introduction of continuing bond expressions has prematurely led other researchers to formulate a theory of causality, espousing that continuing bonds either cause maladaptive grief response or promote healthy grieving (Klass, 2006). The problem with conceptualizing continuing bond expressions within a dichotomous framework is that it ignores the profound differences in bereaved persons' experiences and minimizes the changes in bereaved-deceased attachments after death (Stroebe et al., 2010).

Therefore, additional research is needed to clarify and understand the reconstruction and development of new relationships between bereaved persons and deceased loved ones.

### **Bridging the Gaps**

The purpose of the current research was to advance and expand upon the continuing-relinquishing bonds debate by exploring the subjective and deeply personal experiences that child death from suicide has on surviving parents. Research findings from the current study provide researchers and educators with profound insight into bereaved parents' journey through grief and bereavement and how parents develop and establish post-death relationships with their children. This endeavor has been fulfilled through a phenomenological exploration into the lived experiences of bereaved parents who have lost children to suicide in order to understand how bereaved parents develop new connections or relationships with their deceased children. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with bereaved parents on their bereavement experiences following the

suicidal death of children. Phenomenological analysis was used to identify themes common to all participants.

### **Evaluation of Viable Research Designs**

The majority of studies on continuing bonds in the bereavement literature have employed quantitative designs and focused almost exclusively on the adaptive nature of these bonds (Field, 2006b; Field et al., 2005; Field & Filanosky, 2010). The application of quantitative designs have examined the effects of continuing bonds on post-bereavement adjustment in relation to mental health (Rogers et al., 2008), familial problems (Barlow & Coleman, 2003), marital problems (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2005), social stigma (Feigelman et al., 2009) and a risk for greater grief difficulties (Feigelman et al., 2009; Ronen et al., 2009-2010). When qualitative designs were used to explore the role of continuing bonds, the focus of these studies tended to be on parental identity development (Thrift & Coyle, 2005; Toller, 2008), social communication and support (Harper et al., 2010; Toller, 2005), meaning making (Begley & Quayle, 2007), post-death encounters (Sanger 2008-2009; Taylor, 2005), and bereaved persons attitudes towards life, death, and the afterlife (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009). The participants recruited for these studies primarily consisted of siblings, spouses, and other surviving family members. If bereaved parents were included in these studies, the majority of these parents lost children to accidents, natural causes, and medical complications. The absence of suicide bereaved parents of adolescents in the literature warrants clinical attention and a need for more qualitative studies on parents' lived experience after adolescent suicide.

This phenomenological study addresses the gap in the literature and advances scientific understanding of how bereaved parents experience suicide bereavement after

the death of adolescent children. A phenomenological design was selected after considering the lack of qualitative research in the area of continuing bonds (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Harper et al., 2011; Klass, 2006; Lindqvist et al., 2008; Miers et al., 2012; Owens et al., 2008).

Several qualitative designs were considered for the research study before deciding on a phenomenological methodology. The philosophical assumptions and epistemologies of grounded theory, case study, and narrative approaches were reviewed for relevance to the research question under investigation. Grounded theory as a method of qualitative inquiry is concerned with the development or discovery of a theory that serves as a framework for explaining participant reactions or experiences (Creswell, 2007). This theory is grounded in the data and may be used to guide future research. Moustakas (1994) explained that concepts and hypotheses are generated from the theory that was derived from the data. A critique of grounded theory demonstrated that the development of a theory or model was beyond the scope of the study and that a theory on continuing bonds already existed.

Case study involves the examination of one or more bounded systems across time through multiple sources of data for the purpose of developing a detailed case description (Creswell, 2007). The focus of a case study may be on a single individual, several individuals, or a program. The underlining assumption of case study is that in-depth descriptions of cases can be developed based on multiple sources of data. While case studies have been used to examine continuing bonds among bereaved persons, this approach has been found to be stronger with quantitative measures (Ronen et al., 2009-2010). A critique of case study as a method of qualitative inquiry determined that the

meaning and essence of parents' experiences would be lost using this approach.

Furthermore, interviews were the best method of data collection for understanding bereaved parents experience losing children to suicide. Furthermore,

The narrative approach was reviewed for applicability to the phenomenon under investigation. This qualitative design is concerned with documenting the stories told by a small group of individuals for the purpose of reporting individual experiences in chronological order (Creswell, 2007). While narrative approaches have been used in bereavement research (Maple et al., 2010), this methodology focuses on the interpersonal experiences of individuals and the socio-political contexts in which these stories emerge (Creswell, 2007). Given that the research study was not concerned with restorying participants' narratives in chronological order or examining the cultural and social contexts of participants' experiences, it was determined that a narrative approach would be insufficient for describing the bereavement experiences of suicide bereaved parents.

After a thorough review of these qualitative designs, a phenomenological methodology was selected to investigate the lived experiences of bereaved parents following adolescent suicide. Phenomenology provides an understanding of parents' subjective experiences of losing children to suicide and the meaning they attribute to their attachment bonds. Phenomenological designs have been used in the bereavement literature to explore the emergence and meaning of continuing bonds (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Harper et al., 2011; Woodgate, 2006). However, the majority of these studies excluded suicide-bereaved parents. Qualitative research has demonstrated that grief and bereavement experiences are subjective and deeply personal. The current research study has attempted to address this gap in the literature by adopting a phenomenological

framework to explore the lived experiences of bereaved parents who experience, make sense of, and develop new relationships with their deceased children. A phenomenological analysis is appropriate for addressing the research question: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?”

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The suicide death of a child confronts the basic nature and meaning of parenthood, presenting bereaved parents with unique and complex challenges for maintaining their attachment bonds with their deceased child. The parental roles of protector, nurturer, and provider can no longer be performed as they once were prior to the child's death; therefore, bereaved parents must learn new methods of interacting and maintaining a connection with their deceased children. Qualitative research has found that bereaved parents must find new ways of being-in-the-world (Fielden, 2003) and that these parents do not want closure from their children's deaths (Woodgate, 2006). In fact, a substantial amount of research has found that bereaved persons desire a continued relationship with their deceased loved ones (Harper et al., 2011; Sanger, 2008-209; Taylor, 2005; Toller, 2005; Woodgate, 2006). While research has found a strong relationship between continuing bonds and bereavement adjustment, controversy on the adaptiveness of these bonds in the lives of bereaved parents remains. The purpose of the phenomenological research was to explore the transformational process of the parent-child relationships in the lives of a sample of bereaved parents and the meaning that this new connection had on their suicide bereavement. The question being raised was, "What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?"

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is the scientific study of social phenomenon and human experience for the purpose of developing a deeper understanding and appreciation for the uniqueness of the human condition (Creswell, 2007). The key characteristics that

comprise qualitative research include (a) naturalistic observations, (b) emergent designs, (c) inductive data analysis, (d) personal interpretation, (e) strong emphasis on the meanings participants attribute to their experiences, (f) researcher as the key instrument in data collection, (g) the inclusion of multiple sources of data, (h) viewing the phenomenon under investigation through a theoretical lens, and (i) describing the phenomenon holistically (Creswell, 2009). Wertz (2005) argued that qualitative research methods in psychology are scientific, methodological, systematic, critical, general, and have the ability to provide a thick-description of the human experience or phenomenon under investigation. In bereavement research, qualitative methods of inquiry have emerged as an alternative method of exploring the lived experiences of the bereaved and have provided researchers and practitioners with a wealth of knowledge into the bereavement experience (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Maple et al., 2010; Maple et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2008).

Phenomenology, as a method of qualitative inquiry, was used in the current research as a general framework for understanding the lived experience of bereaved parents and the meaning embedded in the connections that parents have with their deceased children. A transcendental or psychological phenomenological design outlined by Moustakas (1994) has been selected to provide in-depth descriptions of how parents experience child loss to suicide and the establishment and maintenance of a connection with their deceased children throughout the bereavement process. Creswell (2009) considered transcendental phenomenology as a methodology for discovering the essence of a phenomenon as it is experienced by a group of individuals. The purpose of transcendental phenomenology is to understand the individual perception of an

experience and to identify a universal essence of that experience that is commonly shared by a small group of individuals who have had such an experience (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental phenomenology framework focuses more on the meaning of an experience and the description of a phenomenon from the perception of the participants than on the researcher's interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation.

The epistemological tenets of this design are grounded in social constructivism and interpretivism, or the idea that knowledge is constructed within a historical, social, and cultural context (Creswell, 2007; Haverkamp, 2005). Interpretivism espouses that multiple perspectives exist and that quantifying and objectifying reality obscures and dilutes the human experience (Creswell, 2007; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Both researchers and participants bring their own worldviews, perceptions of reality, and experiences into the research study that may unduly influence their descriptions of bereavement, suicide, child death, and the parent-child bond. To prevent phenomenological researchers from interjecting personal biases and predispositions into the research findings, the literature recommends self-reflexivity (Morrow, 2005), or bracketing his own personal and professional experiences that may shape the research findings (Creswell, 2007, 2009). The process of bracketing and self-reflexivity will be discussed more in the section titled, Researcher as Instrument.

The father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, described transcendental phenomenology as a systematic investigation into the subjective experience of a phenomenon as it is constituted in consciousness, free from presuppositions, biases, judgments, and knowledge acquired through previous experience (Giorgi, 2005). This formulation became known as intentionality of consciousness to describe the inner

subjective meaning of a phenomenon as it exists in the individual's consciousness. Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, introduced the concept of being-in-the-world to elucidate the inseparable nature between man and the external world (Annells, 1996). According to Heidegger, a person's interpretations and perceptions of phenomena are deeply rooted in this concept, and that these preconceptions inform the meanings given to future events (Greatrex-White, 2008). This study attempted to understand what the bereavement experience meant to bereaved parents and the meaning that the parent-child attachment has as a conscious experience. The fundamental goal of the study was to describe being-in-the-world for parents bereaved from child suicide.

Understanding the role of intentionality in the research study requires the appreciation of the ontological assumptions of social constructivism. According to Creswell (2009), social constructivism espouses that multiple views of reality and the world exist, each coloring the experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Because individual perceptions are complex and varied, the phenomenological research considers the social, historical, and cultural context in which such interpretations emerge. Given the multitude of perceptions and experiences in parental bereavement, the transformation of the parent-child relationship cannot be quantified; however, these experiences may be described in terms of their qualitative differences. Creswell (2007, 2009) noted that phenomenological researchers are predominately interested in understanding the essence of human experience and the subjective meanings participants ascribe to phenomena. The aim of the phenomenological researcher is to capture, describe, and convey an understanding of parents lived experience of bereavement

following the suicidal death of a child and the meanings given to the new parent-child connection as it is lived and constituted in consciousness.

Phenomenology, like all qualitative research, has strengths and limitations inherent in its design and methodology. Providing a proficient analysis on qualitative research, Creswell (2007, 2009) noted that an invaluable quality of phenomenological research can be found in its in-depth, rich description of participant experiences obtained through participant interviews. In addition, phenomenology provides insight into the subjective experience of a phenomenon that could otherwise be difficult to quantify (Giorgi, 2005). This inherent strength of phenomenological research has been reported elsewhere (Flood, 2010) and has also found to be applicable to therapeutic practices and treatment interventions (Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2006; Wertz, 2005). Another valuable strength of phenomenology is the reliance on multiple sources of data. Phenomenology affords the use of narratives, pictures, letters journals, drawings, and audio-visual materials to provide a comprehensive framework toward understanding the richness and uniqueness of human experience. For instance, phenomenology does not rely on standardized testing instruments for the purpose of generating universal laws applicable to other populations (Creswell, 2007, 2009). While this may be considered a significant limitation by some researchers, phenomenology provides researchers and practitioners with a detailed, first-hand account of bereaved parents experience of child death—an experience that cannot be captured, described, and conveyed through quantitative measures. Because of the small sample size and lack of randomization, qualitative research is limited in its ability to generalize to larger

populations. This qualitative method of inquiry is unable to establish cause-and-effect relationships, a noteworthy strength of a quantitative experiment (Creswell, 2009).

Despite the aforementioned strengths of phenomenology, this method of scientific inquiry may be limited in its generalizability to larger populations due to its small sample size and lack of randomization in sample selection. Phenomenology—like all qualitative designs—is unable to establish cause and effect relationships (Creswell, 2009), which has been problematic in the bereavement literature. Determining whether the formation of a new parent-child connection following child suicide is exclusively adaptive or maladaptive is beyond the scope of the current study. Another limitation of phenomenological designs may be found in the relationship between phenomenology and philosophy. Creswell (2007) explained that phenomenology is deeply embedded in philosophy and comprehending the philosophical assumptions of this method may be difficult for the novice researcher. Phenomenological research methods by Moustakas (1994) and the current literature on phenomenological studies were reviewed (Cairns, 2010; Giorgi, 2008, 2010). A final challenge of conducting phenomenological research rests on the researchers' personal and professional experiences with grief and bereavement and any preconceptions brought to the research study. Bracketing was used to manage any biases, preconceptions, and prior knowledge of grief, bereavement, and continuing bonds. Publications by Hamill and Sinclair (2010), Giorgi (1997), and Moustakas (1994) were reviewed. A self-reflexive journal was used to document personal feelings, reactions, concerns, and questions that emerged throughout the research process for the purpose of bracketing prior knowledge and achieving a pre-suppositionless state.

## **Participant Selection**

In qualitative research, participants are purposively selected based on particular characteristics, traits, or experiences that researchers are interested in exploring and understanding (Creswell, 2009; Polkinghorne, 2005). Morrow (2005) explicated that qualitative inquiry uses purposeful and criterion-based samples for the purpose of providing rich descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. These rich descriptions emerge through first-person narratives and are used to provide vertical depth to participants' experiences of having lost children to suicide (Morrow, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005). The qualitative study of bereavement experiences is complex, unique, diverse, and varies across time and with each individual. This research study involved a purposeful selection of 10 bereaved parents from community agencies providing bereavement-related services and local support groups in two southern states.

Wertz (2005) raised the question, "How many participants are enough for a qualitative research study?" There is no universal principle or formula for specifying an exact number of participants for a qualitative study; however, researchers have presented the notion of theoretical saturation as a qualitative measure of approximation (Morrow, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverstein et al., 2006). Theoretical saturation is the method of recruiting participants for the purpose of obtaining new information for the refinement of constructs and theory. This process requires the researcher to continue with new samples until the addition of new information is no longer helpful (Silverstein et al., 2006). Wertz (2005) described theoretical saturation as a redundancy in findings that accomplishes the researcher's goals of providing a comprehensive description of a phenomenon under investigation.

Phenomenological interviews were conducted with 10 bereaved parents who had lost children between the ages of 10 and 21 years old to suicide. Participants were recruited from local support groups and community centers and interviewed at local libraries. Each interview was audio taped and later transcribed verbatim by a competent, certified transcriptionist. ATLAS.ti was used for data analysis. A modified version of Moustakas' (1994) model was used as an interview guide. Data were collected through these in-depth interviews and inductive data analysis was used to identify meaningful units of information and emerging themes. Moustakas' (1994) work on phenomenological research methods was used as a guide for engaging, interviewing, and collecting data from participants. Once theoretical saturation was achieved and the data had been transcribed and organized into meaningful units, the research findings were shared with bereaved parents to verify the trustworthiness of the data.

In order to participate in the research study, bereaved parents must have lost a child to suicide no earlier than 1 year prior to the study. Bereaved parents who lost children to natural causes (i.e., illness) or other traumatic-related death such as homicide, accident, miscarriage, or sudden infant death syndrome were not included in the study. A further requirement of the research study was for parents to be comfortable with discussing the death of their children and the development of a connection with their children. Bereaved parents of any gender, age, race, culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, or other demographic factor were allowed to participate in the current research.

Exclusion from participation in this study included the following criteria: (a) potential participants whose children's deaths by suicide occurred less than 1 year prior

to the study, (b) potential participants who reported symptoms consistent with a complicated or exaggerated grief response or experienced extreme distress, (c) parents who reported having serious psychiatric disorders, or (d) potential participants who have contemplated suicide recently. Worden (2002) defined an exaggerated grief response as an intensification of normal grief reactions that are excessive and disabling to the person and are often characteristic of a major psychiatric disorder.

### **Procedures**

Participants were recruited from local bereavement support groups, agencies providing bereavement related services, and various chapters of a specific support group from two southern states. Before participant recruitment, gate keepers (i.e., directors, pastors, and group facilitators) were contacted through email or by phone to inform them of the study and to ask for assistance with recruiting bereaved parents (Appendix A). Those gatekeepers that elected to participate were provided with documentation of the (a) identification of the researcher, mentor, and institution, (b) approval from Capella and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), (c) informed consent, (d) purpose and nature of the study, (e) potential risks and benefits of participating, (f) level of participant involvement, (g) limits of confidentiality, and (h) participant rights. Gatekeepers were also briefed on the anticipated time frame of the study, potential impact on participants and the group, and the method of data collection (i.e., interviews). These gatekeepers were asked to distribute a flier (Appendix B) in and around the agency and group meeting rooms to inform prospective parents of the study. The fliers included a brief description of the study and contact information of the researcher should potential participants have questions. Facilitators were encouraged to circulate information about the study through

email and list servers to inform the bereavement community of the study. An approval letter on company letterhead from all gatekeepers was required and received before the researcher recruited participants.

To enroll in the study, bereaved parents had to volunteer to participate and meet the inclusion criteria (Appendix C). If the inclusion criteria had been met, recruitment packets were sent to participants to review, complete, and return prior to scheduling an interview. The recruitment packet contained a recruitment informational sheet to determine whether prospective parents met the criterion for the study (Appendix C), a general demographic form (Appendix D), the informed consent document, the research and interview questions (Appendix E), and a list of community resources in case any information in the packet creates distress or discomfort to bereaved parents. Participants were required to review and sign the informed consent document before returning all forms to the researcher. Once completed recruitment packets were received, parents were contacted to schedule interviews (Appendix F). Participants were not contacted for interviews until recruitment packets were received.

Interviews were conducted in a safe and confidential setting, such as a private conference room at a local library. Given the geographic range of the study, facilities were selected based on physical proximity to the agencies and support groups identified for the study. For example, parents were not required to drive over 70 miles for interviews. Instead, local libraries or community centers were selected as locations for their interviews. Following parental acceptance to be included in the study, the researcher and parent agreed to a mutually satisfying time for the interview.

Before interviews began, recruitment packets were reviewed with parents in person to make sure that parents understood the nature, purpose, duration, involvement, risks, benefits, voluntariness, and right to withdraw from the study at any time (Appendix G). Questions were invited and concerns were addressed. Participants were reminded that all information shared would be kept confidential and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities (Haverkamp, 2005). Parents were required to produce a second signature on the informed consent form at the interview site. The interview began with a review of the research question and a modified version of Maple et al. (2007) interview introduction:

Do you still have some sort of relationship with or connection to your child? Discuss with me, if you will, what that relationship or connection is like. You can tell your story in any way you feel comfortable, perhaps beginning with telling me a bit about your relationship with your child before his or her death and how this relationship has changed over time.

Interviews were open-ended with minimal prompting on the part of the researcher, such as “What thoughts come to mind?” “What happened next?” and “What does that mean to you?”

Data were securely stored on the researcher’s office computer and access to the computer and word documents were password protected. Hard copies of the data (i.e., interview transcripts) were kept in a locked filing cabinet located in the researcher’s office. In general, all data will be destroyed 7 years after the publication date, as required by Capella University. A coding system was used and stored separately to protect the identity of participants (Walker, 2007).

Phenomenological interviews were audio-tapped and later transcribed verbatim by a competent, certified transcriptionist. The transcribed data was uploaded by the

researcher in ATLAS.ti for data analysis. A digital audio recorder was activated directly before reading the opening statement aloud and turned off at the end of the interview. Data were collected and analyzed from the interview transcripts. Pseudonyms were used in place of actual names to protect parent's privacy. A coding system was implemented and stored separately to protect the identity of participants (Walker, 2007). Audio interviews were transferred from the recording device to the researcher's office computer. Audio files were copied to an audio CD using Nero 7 and stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's private practice. All traces of the interview from the recording device and computer were deleted. The audio CD will be kept for a total of 7 years and will be used for the purpose of cross-referencing the written transcripts for clarity and accuracy. Written transcripts were uploaded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti.

### **Researcher as Instrument**

Researchers are the primary instruments of data collection in phenomenological research. Qualitative data are collected through direct observation of participants' behavior, in-depth, open-ended interviews, and examination of visual materials, notes, and memos compiled by researchers (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative researchers are responsible for describing values, interpretations, and biases throughout the research process. Creswell (2007) argued that culture, gender, history, and personal experience of researchers are deeply embedded in qualitative inquiry, in turn, shaping the research process and the research findings. Similarly, Morrow (2005) identified researchers' subjectivity as the hallmark of qualitative research and data analysis, adding further support for the incidence of researcher bias. Qualitative researchers bring their own worldviews, philosophical assumptions, and preconceptions into the landscape of

qualitative discourse. Phenomenological researchers must be cognizant about their personal and professional experiences with death, perceptions of death and suicide, and the implications these predispositions may have on the conclusions drawn from the research findings.

Transcendental phenomenologists consider the level of self-awareness and willingness to monitor preconceptions and biases as reflexivity. The concept of reflexivity is rooted in Husserlian philosophy and refers to the abeyance of the natural attitude—the presumption that a phenomenon can be defined based on prior concepts and knowledge—in favor of a fresh, naïve perspective of a phenomenon as it presents itself in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Reflexivity provides researchers with intuitive knowledge about the self and the dynamic interaction between researchers and participants. Haverkamp (2005) described this process as professional reflexivity to emphasize the researcher’s professional role and the awareness of his or her ethical responsibilities. This dynamic interaction between researchers and participants reflects the co-construction process, indicating that the meanings given to the relational space between researchers and participants is created together through mutual interactions and the historical, cultural, and social implications from both persons (Annells, 1996; Greatrex-White, 2008; Morrow, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverstein et al., 2006; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). It is insufficient for researchers to merely mention their subjectively at the outset of the research process. Instead, Silverstein et al. (2006) recommended that researchers keep self-reflective journals documenting personal experiences, reactions, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of participant narratives. For the current study, a self-reflective journal was kept to document personal

experiences, interpretations, thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the narratives shared by bereaved parents. This journal was shared with the mentor and research committee, as needed, throughout the research process.

According to transcendental phenomenology, adopting a self-reflexive attitude necessitates an understanding of the epoche process and transcendental phenomenological reduction. Husserl described the epoche process as consciously suspending or bracketing preconceived notions or prior knowledge of the phenomenon under study so that the phenomenon may be perceived freshly, for the first time, in all of its manifestations (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). Researchers have described the epoche process as a separation of the axiological values of the researcher from the ontological assumptions of the subject matter. Moustakas (1994) contended that the epoche is a necessary process that segues into the transcendental phenomenological reduction. By engaging in a dialogue and entering the lived experience of the participant, the researcher becomes a participant insofar as he or she co-creates the reality between him- or herself and the participant (Silverstein et al., 2006). Researchers must bracket their worldviews, philosophical assumptions, beliefs, and values so that participants remain the author of their own narrative and are not unduly influenced by the researcher (Polkinghorne, 2005). Prior to beginning the research study, a self-reflective journal was used to understand personal beliefs, preconceptions, and values of the phenomenon being explored. This self-reflexive journal continued throughout the research process and was openly shared with the supervisor and mentor to continue the self-reflective process and monitor personal responses to participant stories.

### **Research Question**

The current research used a phenomenological paradigm to explore the lived experiences of bereaved parents following the death of a child to suicide. The purpose of this research was to develop a better understanding of how bereaved parents experience their present relationship with their deceased children and describe the essence of the parent-child attachment post-loss. This was accomplished by answering the research question: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?”

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Phenomenological interviews served as the primary method of data collection in the research study; however, other sources of data were used, including the researcher’s self-reflective journal, notes and comments made by the researcher during interviews and data analysis, and qualitative artifacts (i.e., journals, poems, sent or unset letters to the bereaved, personal mementos, and sentimental objects belonging to bereaved parents). Written artifacts provided by parents were scanned and uploaded immediately after the interview. This procedure eliminated the need for possession of the artifacts outside the presence of parents and ensured that all artifacts would be returned to participants after the first interview. Each artifact was later attached to parents’ interview transcripts using ATLAS.ti for the purpose of comparing and contrasting themes among data sources. Written artifacts were analyzed in an identical method as phenomenological interviews and were used to illuminate the narratives of bereaved parents and provide a textured background description of the contexts and settings. Non-written artifacts (i.e., objects) were documented as to the presentation, meaning, and description of the items.

Qualitative data analysis is a complex and ongoing process that involves triangulation, researchers immersing themselves completely into the data set, continual reflection of data transcripts, organizing and preparing the data for analysis, identifying significant statements and phrases used by participants, moving deeper into the data set, formulating meaningful units from significant statements, clustering significant statements into themes or categories, and achieving concreteness and theoretical saturation (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Polkinghorne, 2005; Wertz, 2005). While the goal of qualitative research is to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena, the method of triangulation provides for the inclusion of multiple perspectives for the purpose of developing an overarching framework toward understanding the *essence* of lived experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005). The inclusion of multiple participants affords researchers with data about phenomena from multiple perspectives that illustrate the formation and emergence of themes. The data obtained from data collection can be systematically organized to provide a rich description and exhaustive account of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007, 2009).

For the purpose of the research study, Moustakas' (1994) modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to organize and analyze phenomenological data obtained through qualitative interviews. This method began with a brief description of the researcher's experience of interviewing bereaved parents about child loss from suicide and parent's creation of a new kind of connection to their deceased children. Researchers have described this step as fundamental to the *epoche* process when researchers suspend prior knowledge, assumptions, and expectations of the phenomenon in order to focus on the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2007; Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). After the

researchers' experience had been completely described, a list of significant statements made by participants was developed that pertained to *how* parents experience child loss and their connections to their deceased children. Each statement was considered in its entirety, possessing equal worth and was characterized by its non-overlapping and non-repetitive qualities. Moustakas (1994) called this process horizontalization to illuminate the endless possibilities of textural qualities that can emerge in one's perception of a phenomenon.

Following the process of horizontalization, the lists of significant statements were combined into meaningful units or themes. From the meaningful units, textural descriptions were developed of *what* parents experienced in terms of the qualities of child loss and the new relationship parents formed with their deceased children. Moustakas explained that textural descriptions illuminate the *what* of a phenomenon as it appears in consciousness and includes feelings, thoughts, ideas, situations, and examples. Moustakas recommended that textural descriptions be described in its entirety, omitting nothing. Considering each dimension and angle of textural descriptions, the underlining structures and dimensions of the new parent-child connection emerged as it was experienced in the lives of bereaved parents. Structural descriptions elucidate *how* child loss and the new parent-child connection are experienced and contain the context in which the phenomenon emerges. These descriptions required an exploration into *how* parents reflect on and understand their experiences. Structural descriptions include the cognitions, feelings, and sense experiences of child loss and the relationship as described by parents. Creswell (2007) noted that the setting and context under which the phenomenon emerges must also be taken into consideration.

Finally, a synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions was incorporated to provide a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) explained that the essence of an experience is that which is universal to all participants. For the current study, the essence of child loss to suicide and the existence of a new connection is that which is shared by all bereaved parents in the study.

Scientific rigor of qualitative research rests not on the generalizability of the research findings but rather on the transferability, dependability, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research findings. Transferability refers to the applicability of the research findings beyond the sample of the research study (Morrow, 2005). The sample of parents in the current study was purposefully selected based on their experiences of child loss and the development of a connection to their deceased children. Transferability is a fundamental element of all research designs, but has particular importance to qualitative research because of the sample size and purposefulness in sample selection. To ensure transferability of the research sample, an adequate description was provided of the researcher, the participants, the context of the interview, and the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant (Silverstein et al., 2006). This is explained in separate sections titled the Researcher as Instrument, Participants of the Study, and Discussion of the Results to inform readers of how interpretations of data were made and the relevance of the context to the research findings. Understanding how these elements can be useful in similar or other contexts is essential for program development, therapeutic interventions, and future research in the area of child loss, suicide bereavement, and the post-death parent-child relationship.

Dependability is analogous to reliability in quantitative research and involves a well-described outline that demonstrates consistency in the chronology of research activities, data collection and analysis, emerging themes, and participant narratives (Creswell, 2007; Morrow, 2005). Morrow (2005) referred to this process as an audit trail for other researchers interested in advancing or understanding the research findings could examine the procedural and methodological steps carried out by the primary researcher. All steps were documented throughout the research process and adequate records were maintained for peer and IRB review. A comprehensive audit record of all correspondence with prospective research and interview sites was maintained.

As the primary instrument of data collection, the researcher ensured credibility by adopting a self-reflexive attitude and by participant checks and co-analysis. Researcher self-reflexivity refers to the researcher's level of awareness of the influential effects that his or her bias, judgments, and prior knowledge of the phenomenon has on the research findings (Silverstein et al., 2006). Morrow (2005) recommended that researchers inform their audiences of their attitudes, perspectives, philosophical worldviews, and subjectivity prior to the investigation. Prior knowledge and experiences with grief, bereavement, suicide, child loss, and the continuing bond phenomenon were provided in order to suspend all prior knowledge of child loss and the development of a post-death connection. This is an essential step to phenomenological research and is consistent with Moustakas' recommendation that researchers document feelings, thoughts, concerns, and expectations of participants prior to each interview. The trustworthiness of the research study has been achieved through the adoption of a self-reflexive attitude and a willingness to state any implicit assumptions or biases to the reader.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Researchers examining the effects of children's death on parental bereavement are faced with numerous ethical challenges throughout the research process, such as confidentiality, recruitment methods, timing of recruitment, methods of data collection, training and support, researcher qualifications, informed consent, voluntariness, unanticipated disclosures, and research induced stress (Cook, 2001; Meert, Eggly, Dean, Pollack, Zimmerman, Anand et al., 2008). The primary responsibility of addressing these ethical considerations rests on researchers. Confidentiality has been preserved through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of personal identifiable information disclosed by participants during the interviews. Each participant signed a confidentiality agreement explaining that all information and data received from participants will be kept in a secure location, either on the researcher's password protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet located in his office. Similarly, the anonymity of bereaved parents was protected from group facilitators and other group members by having potential participants contact the researcher (Fielden, 2003). Before contacting bereavement facilitators and gathering data, the researcher secured permission from Capella's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the dissertation committee that the research study would be conducted in an ethical and professional manner.

Nonmaleficence (i.e., do no harm), justice (i.e., fairness), dignity, fidelity (i.e., trust and commitment), veracity (i.e., truthfulness), and participant autonomy (i.e., freedom to choose) are the essential ingredients of professional and academic research (Cook, 2001; Haverkamp, 2005; Walker, 2007) and has been followed in the current research study. Stroebe, Stroebe, and Schut (2003) argued that the "researcher must

protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants” throughout the research process (p. 239). These authors included the freedom of the participant to refuse initial participation in the study and the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. Haverkamp (2005) extrapolated from these principles the concept of truthfulness, or the researcher’s awareness to the potential vulnerability of research participants, particularly given the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship. This power imbalance between researchers and participants has been acknowledged and a collaborative relationship was sought to promote parental empowerment. Such a collaborative relationship recognizes parents as the experts and authors of their lives, permitting bereaved parents the opportunity to choose the pace and content of the interview. The practice of this principle has been enhanced through the adherence to a professional code of ethics, such as the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005). The ACA code of ethics includes a specific section on research and publication that was followed throughout the research process.

Bereavement literature suggests that bereaved parents are a vulnerable population (Cook, 2001; Dyregrovetal et al., 2010-2011; Hynson, Aroni, Bauld, & Sawyer, 2006; Meert et al., 2008; Stroebe & Schut, 2001) and that certain safeguards must be installed before interviewing participants. For example, participants were advised of the emotional and psychological risks associated with the disclosure of their bereavement narratives. Sharing the profound emotional pain associated with the suicidal death of a child and the tumultuous grieving process may raise parents’ stress levels, thereby increasing the chance of experiencing anger, depression, anxiety, or other psychiatric symptoms. All participants were informed about local community resources that specialize in grief-

related services (i.e., grief support groups, grief counselors, and sliding-fee counseling agencies; Fielden, 2003).

Given the diverse and intense grief reactions among bereaved parents, an eligibility criterion was developed for participant recruitment. This criterion was reviewed in the section on participant selection; however, it is worth noting that the literature is in agreement that 1 year post loss is a sufficient time frame to solicit participants for bereavement research (Hynson et al., 2006). When recruiting participants, Cook (2001) recommended that researchers be cognizant of the time of year that the interview takes place and consider the meaning attributed to special dates such as the anniversary of the child's death. Recruitment of prospective participants began after Christmas and New Years to reduce the likelihood of parents experiencing depression, anxiety, discomfort, or any other psychological symptom. Participation in the current research study was voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw from the study under any circumstance. All information received from participants was strictly confidential and was not shared with anyone outside of the interview, except those individuals listed in the informed consent document (Meert et al., 2008).

Before participants enrolled in the current study, they were informed of the nature of the study and had to voluntarily consent to participate in the research process. Informed consent is an ongoing dialogue between researcher and participant that outlines the range of benefits and potential consequences of participation, respect for participant self-determination, limits of confidentiality, level of participant involvement, methods of data collection, how risks will be minimized, researcher qualifications and affiliations, contact information for the researcher and sponsoring institute, and the appropriate

referrals, if necessary (Cook, 2001; Creswell, 2009; Meert et al., 2008; Walker, 2007). Researchers are mandated by the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) to explain the contents of informed consent in language that is understandable to participants and provide participants with explanations after data collection for the purpose of clarifying any misconceptions about the nature of the research study.

### **Expected Findings**

Given the horrific nature surrounding the death of a child, it would seem plausible that bereaved parents who have lost children to suicide would report more complicated grief reactions than those parents whose child died from natural causes. This anticipated outcome has been partially supported by the research in terms of grief difficulties (Feigelman et al., 2008-2009), particularly when bereaved parents reported stigmatization (Feigelman et al., 2009). From an attachment perspective, it would seem plausible that bereaved parents are more likely to express continuing bonds toward those children who are older at death than those children who die in infancy. Insufficient research exists to support this hypothesis, however, indicating a need for further research in this area. It is well documented that, regardless of the child's age at death, prenatally or adult, bereaved parents face insurmountable tasks that strike at the core of their personal identity and their ability to function (Rando, 1985; Rubin & Malkinson, 2001). Because of the complex nature of attachment formation, maintenance, and disruption, it can be expected that post-death connections with deceased children would differ among bereaved parents based on prior attachment styles with their children. The nature of the relationship between bereaved and deceased has been recognized as a mediating variable in parental bereavement (Hooyman & Kramer, 2008; Wijngaards-de Meij, Stroebe, Schut, Stroebe,

Van Den Bout, Van der Heijden et al., 2007). Despite the perceived or expected commonalities in parental bereavement, counselors providing services to bereaved parents should be cognizant of the attachment relationship between bereaved and deceased as this informs the grieving process (Wijngaards-de Meij, Stroebe, Schut, Stroebe, Van den Bout, Van der Heijden et al., 2005, 2008). The nature, intensity, and dynamics of this relationship may shed light on the unique and idiosyncratic characteristics of parental bereavement and the long term effects this has on parental adjustment (Rogers et al., 2008).

### **Chapter 3. Summary**

Qualitative research is the scientific exploration of human or social phenomenon from the subjective perspective of the participant for the purpose of understanding human experience. This method of scientific inquiry aims to clarify and describe human experience as it appears in consciousness through the language and meaning provided by the participant (Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverstein et al., 2006). Qualitative research is recognized as a valuable method of inquiry in the social sciences comprised of its own philosophical assumptions, worldviews, paradigms, and epistemologies that influences the research process (Creswell, 2007). In qualitative research researchers are considered the primary instruments of data collection by relying on multiple sources of data to develop composite descriptions of phenomena. Qualitative researchers espouse that phenomena and experience scan be understood holistically and that participants' interpretations are inseparable from their own history, backgrounds, prior understandings, and the contexts from which these interpretations emerge (Creswell, 2009).

Transcendental phenomenology is a method of qualitative inquiry that explores the essence of human experience from the perspective of one or more human participants. The fundamental nature of phenomenology is identifying, clarifying, and describing the universal essence of a particular human experience that is shared between several individuals (Creswell, 2007). The epistemological tenets of phenomenology are predicated on social constructivism, or the worldview that a person's perceptions of reality are created from the participant's previous experiences, history, social interactions, and his or her understanding of the self, others, and the world (Creswell, 2007; Flood, 2010). Phenomenology is primarily concerned with the subjective experiences of human existence, consciousness, and being-in-the-world as described by the participant (Giorgi, 2005). The phenomenological movement had its momentum in the writings of Husserl and Heidegger, two prominent philosophers who contributed immensely to the psychological community and the scientific field of qualitative research (Copperstone, 2009; Flood, 2010; Morrow, 2005; Wertz, 2005). These philosophers espoused that phenomenology could be used as a scientific method of investigation for nonphysical entities that could not be studied through quantitative measures. Phenomenological research can advance scientific understanding of the personal experience of bereaved parents who lose children to suicide. A phenomenological investigation into the lived experiences of bereaved parents would address the gap in the bereavement literature (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Begley & Quayle, 2007; Cerel et al., 2008; Fielden, 2003; Gudmundsdottir, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Thrift & Coyle, 2005) and support the move toward theoretical integration between continuing bonds and bereavement (Stroebe et al., 2010).

A transcendental phenomenological framework was used to explore the essence of suicide bereavement from the lived experiences of bereaved parents and how the parent-child relationship transforms after child suicide. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with 10 bereaved parents who have lost children between the ages of 12 and 21 years old no earlier than 1 year prior to the interview. Participants were recruited from bereavement support groups, agencies, and chapters of a specific support group located in two southern states. Moustakas' (1994) work on phenomenological research methods was used as a guide for engaging, interviewing, and collecting data from participants. All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim by a competent, certified transcriptionist, and uploaded to ATLAS.ti for data analysis. A modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to identify meaningful units of information and emerging themes. Once theoretical saturation was achieved and the data had been transcribed and organized into meaningful units, the research findings were shared with each bereaved parent to verify the trustworthiness of the data.

## CHAPTER 4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

### Introduction: The Study and the Researcher

#### The Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of bereaved parents and their connections to their deceased adolescent children following suicide. The previous chapters introduced the traumatic and devastating nature of adolescent suicide on parental bereavement that was followed by a systematic review of the bereavement literature with a focus on attachment theory and the phenomenon of continuing bonds. Following the review of the literature, the philosophy and methodology of phenomenological research was examined as a tool for exploring and describing the lived experiences of suicide-bereaved parents and their connections to their deceased children.

This chapter will present the process and results of data collection and the procedures of phenomenological data analysis are discussed with an emphasis on the application and implementation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Moustakas' (1994) modified version of this method was used to analyze phenomenological data from interview transcripts. Data for this study were collected through open-ended in-depth interviews with 10 bereaved parents for the purpose of answering the research question, "What are the lived experiences of parents that lose children to suicide?" An interview guide was used to provide a richer and deeper understanding of the parent-child relationship after death. This chapter is organized into the following sections: introduction to the study and the researcher, description of the sample, research methodology applied to data analysis, presentation of data and results, and summary.

## **The Researcher**

Given the fact that researchers have personal and professional interest in their studies, there is a possibility that these interests could influence the results of the study. To minimize the potential for bias, the epoche process was used to develop self-awareness of potential biases, preconceived notions, and presuppositions toward the phenomenon under inquiry. In order to adopt a fresh and new perception of the phenomenon preconceived notions and presuppositions were suspended (bracketed) during the study (Moustakas, 1994). This process was facilitated through meditation, reflection, and keeping a journal.

Following the epoche process, phenomenological reduction was used to identify the textural qualities used by bereaved parents to describe their experiences of establishing and maintaining connections with their deceased children. These textural descriptions of the phenomenon were then used to identify structural descriptions through a process of imaginative variation, which is conceiving varying perspectives, frames of reference, polarities, and imagination used to explore the possible meanings embedded within the textural descriptions. Once the structural descriptions were constructed, a textural-structural synthesis was constructed that provided a rich description of the essence of bereaved parents' experiences.

### **Description of the Sample (Participants)**

The 10 bereaved parents who had lost adolescent children to suicide no earlier than one year from the date of the interview were all mothers whose children were aged 10 to 21 years of age at the time of death. Mothers ranged in age from 36 to 59 years with an average age of 49.5 years. Characteristics of the sample are represented in Table 1 as a

demographic sheet.

Table 1 *Demographic Sheet*

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Gender of Deceased	Age of Deceased at death	Time since Death
Laura	55	Caucasian	Married	Female	17	9.4 years
Kathleen	50	Caucasian	Married	Male	18	2.6 years
Dana	42	American Indian	Married	Male	15	3 years
Karen	57	Caucasian	Married	Male	17	8 years
Sarah	53	Caucasian	Divorced	Male	18	6 years
Mary Beth	42	Caucasian	Divorced	Male	12	1.6 years
Melissa	53	Caucasian	Married	Male	17	6 years
Nancy	36	Hispanic	Married	Male	15	6 years
Sandra	49	Caucasian	Married	Male	19	1.6 years
Julia	57	Caucasian	Divorced	Male	21	9.6 years

All bereaved parents that showed an interest in the study participated. No participant withdrew from the study, and there were no interruptions during the interview process. Eight of the ten interviews occurred in a private study room within a local library closest to the participant's home. At the request of Participants 1 and 2, interviews occurred outside the library on a quiet and secluded bench at a local cemetery and a memory park, respectively. Participants 1 and 2 reported that these locations were

convenient and comfortable for them as opposed to a library setting. These two interviews were completed without interruption or deviation from the interview procedures. The natural setting of these interviews was found to enrich and deepen participants' descriptions of their experience of maintaining connections to their children.

### **Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis**

Phenomenological research methods were used to understand and describe bereaved parents' lived experiences of maintaining connections to their deceased children. Phenomenological data were obtained from audio recordings of the interviews and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, and then the interviews were compared with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. During this procedure, personal reflections, comments, and participant nonverbal behaviors were noted in the margins of each transcript. Participants were sent their own copy of their transcript for the purpose of making appropriate revisions and to confirm the accuracy of their narrative, and all comments and alterations made by participants were incorporated into the original transcripts. Interview data were prepared, organized, and coded using ATLAS.ti, which is discussed later in this section.

Phenomenological data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. This modified version of data analysis presents a systematic and organized method of identifying significant statements made by participants, developing clusters of meaning, reflecting on textural descriptions, creating structural descriptions, and creating textural-structural syntheses that represent the essence of bereaved parents experiences of having connections to their deceased children. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method involves four essential processes (a) epoche, (b)

phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) the intuitive integration process.

Before data were collected and prepared, a phenomenological attitude toward the phenomenon being examined was adopted. This attitude involved reflecting on and developing a deep and profound awareness of any prior experiences, interpretations, and biases toward grief, adolescent suicide, continuing bonds, and parent-child relationships that might influence the analysis of data. Moustakas (1994) described the epoche process as a prerequisite for entering the subjective world of participants and for understanding the phenomenon of inquiry as a lived experience of the other that is free from the judgment and preconceived notions of researchers. Epoche is a complex process that requires suspension of beliefs, ideas, and prior knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. Reflective meditation provided an awareness of personal experiences of loss and grief and the influence of exposure to prior research on bereaved parents, adolescent suicide, and continuing bonds that might potentially affect the analysis of data. Time was set aside to mediate and reflect on prior knowledge before each interview and before reviewing each transcript for the purpose of seeing and valuing bereaved parents' experiences from a new perspective. This process was further facilitated by keeping a journal to record thoughts and feelings before and after each interview and reviewing it at critical points during data preparation and analysis.

Phenomenological reduction, the second process in phenomenological data analysis, was used as a tool for appreciating and considering the value of each participant's narrative. Moustakas (1994) posited that phenomenological reduction is the process of identifying the textural qualities of participants experience when describing

the phenomenon of inquiry. This was accomplished by becoming fully emerged in the data by thoroughly reviewing and reflecting upon each transcript for the purpose of developing a deeper understanding of participant's experiences. Following the initial process of becoming familiar with the data, ATLAS.ti was used to create and assign codes throughout participants' interviews. Initially, codes were created with the first interview transcript and later refined and expanded upon with each subsequent transcript. Codes were developed based on the content of participants' statements and the context in which these statements emerged. Each statement of the data set was considered as having equal worth, therefore, to honor the entire data set, codes were assigned to all statements made by participants, regardless of whether they appeared relevant or irrelevant to the research question.

Once codes were assigned to the entire data set, each code was reviewed separately to determine its relationship to the research question. This process allowed relevant and irrelevant codes to be separated based on the nature of each code and its connection to the research question. Once relevant codes were established, the statements coded were reviewed for their significance for the descriptions of parents' lived experiences of the connections to their deceased children. The process of identifying how parents described their connection to their deceased children as a conscious experience represents the horizontalization of the data. Moustakas (1994) described horizontalization as a fundamental step and tool of data analysis because it provides the researcher with textural descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, each relevant statement or horizon was analyzed and those statements that were overlapping or repetitive were eliminated. The remaining statements constituted the meaning units of

bereaved parents' experiences and were subsequently clustered into themes (Moustakas, 1994).

Textural descriptions provided by bereaved parents described their continuing connections to deceased children in their own words. Through imaginative variation, the textural descriptions were used to develop the structural descriptions of parents' lived experiences. According to Moustakas (1994), imaginative variation is a tool that provides researchers with possible meanings by way of imagination and through the adoption of various frames of reference, polarities, and divergent perspectives of the phenomenon. Imaginative variation illuminates the structural descriptions embedded within the textural descriptions of participants' narratives. Moustakas (1994) defined structural descriptions as rich and detailed accounts of how the phenomenon emerges as a conscious experience for participants and the underlining dynamics inherent in these experiences. A combination of the contextual elements in which the phenomenon was experienced and the thoughts and feelings shared by participants were used to create structural descriptions for each participant. Various possible interpretations of the meanings of textural descriptions were imagined, and the most plausible possibilities were presented as structural descriptions that described the meanings associated with bereaved parents' experiences of maintaining connections to their deceased children.

The final process in the phenomenological data analysis method is the intuitive integration of the textural and structural descriptions derived earlier from the phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994) described the intuitive integration as a complex process of synthesizing the textural-structural descriptions across the data set for the purpose of understanding the meaning and essence

of the phenomenon under inquiry. This final step of data analysis was accomplished through meditation and reflection on the *what* and *how* bereaved parents experienced their connections with their deceased children. Through imaginative variation, the meanings and essences of bereaved parents' experiences of having a connection with their deceased children were created.

### **Presentation of the Data and Results of the Analysis**

This section presents the phenomenological data from the interview transcripts and the results of the data analysis. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' privacy and to remove any additional identifiable information, such as the name of cities or towns, restaurants, and names of other people mentioned in the interviews. The research findings are presented as individual textural descriptions of participants' lived experiences in establishing and maintaining connections with their deceased children. These textural descriptions are organized by themes and were created from the meaning units extrapolated from individual interview transcripts. Structural descriptions were developed from these individual textural descriptions and are presented for each participant. To eliminate redundancy and demonstrate support for psychological interpretations, individual textural descriptions are embedded within the structural descriptions provided. A composite description of the shared lived experiences of parents is provided to capture the essence of establishing and maintaining connections to deceased children.

### **Textural Description for "Laura"**

There were four textural themes that emerged from the 70 meaning units identified in "Laura's" interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted

verbatim from the interview transcript. The four textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, (c) honoring my child's memory, and (d) remembering and including my child.

### **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

One way that "Laura" has maintained a connection to her daughter is through memories. "It's kind of hard for me to think about still having a relationship with her because it's one sided. I don't really know really what you call it, but it's what? A memory? We don't want our child forgotten." "Laura" explained that she has tried to keep the memories positive, "I know that she's happy" and "We make her special because she was special." She has found ways to honor her daughter's memory by "remembering her, keeping her... in our lives."

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

"Laura" has also established and maintained a connection to her daughter through the use of physical objects. "We have the little lamb that she slept with and her little glasses and some pictures." She stated that these items are kept in a special glass case, so that "we can see them all the time." Another item "Laura" admitted to using was her daughter's blanket. "She had a quillow. It's like a soft baby size little blanket, and we use that in the winter sitting on the couch and stuff like that." Many of these items belonged to "Ashley," so "we keep them close." "Laura" explained that "You can't have them. You know? You have your other children and you can see them and talk to them and all that. But this is all you have." The difficulty in separating herself from these items is incomprehensible. "It took several years before I could even throw away any paper she wrote on." "Laura" recognized that she's "not going to make new memories with [her

daughter], so you just keep the things that you can live with that was hers.”

Depending on the nature of the item, “Laura” reported that she has worn certain articles of clothing belonging to her daughter. “When I have lost weight and I could wear “Ashley’s” pants, I would wear her jeans and that felt nice. To wear something that was hers.” “Laura” admitted that she continues to keep “Ashley’s” house slippers in the closet. “I don’t really wear them, but I have worn them. I can’t say that I don’t wear them, but I have worn them.” She expressed difficulty observing other family members wearing “Ashley’s” clothes. “My oldest daughter wears her pajamas and stuff. That’s tough. It’s kind of hard to see her wearing them.” “Laura” does, however, continue to wear her daughter’s jewelry. “This was her ring.” For the interview, “Laura” wore several necklaces that were sentimental to her. She explained that each necklace held a special meaning and connection to her daughter. The first necklace was a cross given to “Laura” at the hospital by a family member when saying their goodbyes to her daughter. “Laura” recalled the family member saying, “I held this in “Ashley’s” hand while we were saying good-bye.” A second necklace was also given by a family member and contained a little heart that read on one side “the heart remembers” and on the back was inscribed, “Ashley.” The final necklace “Laura” wore for the interview was a two piece necklace of a broken heart, whereby “the other half of the heart is next to ‘Ashley’s’ urn.”

“Laura” decided to cremate her daughter’s body because the idea of burying her child in the cemetery was “suffocating.” She admitted that “I just could not put her in the ground and drive away.” For “Laura”, there is “comfort” in knowing that “we don’t have to come visit her” at the cemetery. Instead, “Ashley’s” remains are kept in an urn in a glass case alongside her other belongings. This is a comforting feeling for “Laura”

because “she’s at home with us.” She admitted that, “It’s not necessarily that you feel close to them. It’s just kind of, maybe, the distance you have.” When the time comes, “Laura” plans to have her own body placed in a wall next to her daughter’s remains. She stated that, even though “we will be with her in eternity in Heaven, our bodies will be in a wall next to each other. That’s one way that we’re going to make sure she’s with us.”

### **Honoring My Child’s Memory**

Through gardening, donating, and participating in activities, “Laura” has discovered ways to honor her daughter’s memory. “It’s just things I do for my own comfort to remember her and to honor her memory, so that she’s not forgotten. I’m not going to forget her, obviously.” She explained that, “We do things and think things that make us feel good. I don’t know if any of it is scriptural, but people do things that comfort them.” For instance, “Laura” has planted trees in “Ashley’s” memory and created a garden that she described as “a peaceful place, in your yard, [to] go out and sit.” In addition, she has donated to suicide prevention campaigns, participated in Out of the Darkness walks, and set up a scholarship at church in “Ashley’s” name. “If there’s parents that want their child to go there, but don’t have enough money then their child can still come here.”

On the first Mother’s Day without her daughter, “Laura” decided to get a tattoo. “I got a tattoo of a heart with angel wings...it has a little halo.” When asked about the significance of the tattoo, “Laura” answered, “It’s just personal. You just want that memory there. It’s just something that you want to do to have that connection to show that they are always remembered because it’s permanent.”

## **Remembering and Including My Child**

“Laura” has maintained her connection to “Ashley” through creative ways of remembering and including her daughter on special occasions or holidays. For instance, “Laura” described a common family tradition on holidays:

We have, you know, a big picture of her on the wall with some things. And actually at holiday time or when we take family pictures we stand in front of her picture so that she is on the wall and included in our picture. So she’s there with us. And the cousins have all done it when they, you know, had a holiday and their all together. And they’ll include her that way.

Finding ways for the family to incorporate “Ashley” into the family life cycle is important to “Laura” and has been facilitated through remembering and including her in conversation. “She’s important to my husband and myself and to her siblings. We talk about her all the time.” For “Laura”, talking about and sharing her daughter with others honors “Ashley’s” memory. She explained that keeping “Ashley’s” memory alive to other people is an important part of maintaining a connection to her daughter. “We want her to be important to others. We want everyone to remember “Ashley” and still love her.” Even though her daughter is physically absent, “Laura” argued that she can still remember and share her memories of “Ashley” with others. “We don’t act like she’s alive, but we don’t act like she never existed either.”

Positive thoughts about “Ashley” emerged as the final strategy for establishing and maintaining a connection to her daughter. In the beginning, these thoughts were considered “very tough” and “all consuming.” Over time, however, the intensity of these thoughts appeared to change. “Maybe you do think more in the early months or years, but now with time, you think about her off and on throughout the day instead of being consumed every moment of every day.” As these thoughts became more tolerable for

“Laura”, she was able to focus more on the “good memories.” There still remained, however, an element of sadness in the absence of her memory. “When it happens that you don’t remember them every moment of every day and you realize it, it’s kind of... It’s kind of sad for you. But it is normal. Don’t be hard on yourself... laugh, enjoy those bittersweet times.” Even though the intensity of “Laura’s” thoughts and memories of “Ashley” has changed over time, she acknowledged that, “You never stop thinking about your child.”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Laura”**

The structures that permeated “Laura’s” lived experience of having a connection to her child include being in a one-sided relationship, self in relation to physical objects, and fear of forgetting. “Laura’s” feeling of being in a “one-sided relationship” was experienced early in her bereavement journey and developed from the awareness of the physical limitations imposed by death. Accepting that “Ashley” is no longer physically present in the world has produced a significant amount of psychological discomfort; however, this discomfort has been ameliorated through the establishment of a new kind of connection to her daughter. This connection is qualitatively different from the traditional and physical relationship that preceded “Ashley’s” death. In essence, this connection surpasses the physical world and is experienced on an emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimension.

The second structural theme, self in relation to physical objects, emerged as a symbolic expression of the love she felt for “Ashley” and a direct means of connection to her daughter. Through the use of physical objects “Laura” was able to sustain and, in essence, recreate the attachment bond she shared with her daughter. The sentimental

value of these objects was priceless for “Laura” because they either once belonged to “Ashley” or were given to “Laura” in memory of her daughter. “It’s just...that’s all you have. You can’t have them.” Yearning for “Ashley’s” touch or some form of physical connection, “Laura” discovered that she could experience a similar closeness to her daughter through the use of these physical items. By either using these physical objects or being within close proximity of these items, “Laura” was able to experience an emotional closeness to her daughter that left her feeling “comforted.” For “Laura”, the meaning of these physical objects and the purpose they once served has changed over time. Recently, she discovered that she can experience an emotional closeness to her daughter separate from these items through memories, positive thoughts, participating in activities, creating things, and sharing positive memories with others.

Fear of forgetting was the final structural theme that emerged from “Laura’s” interview. The possibility that other people would eventually forget “Ashley” and that the world would go on without her was a pervasive fear for “Laura”. The reality that “life goes on” without our loved ones and that people often forget the deceased presented an existential dilemma for “Laura” between accepting reality and struggling to keep “Ashley’s” memory alive. “Whatever mark we leave in life, eventually, we are going to be forgotten. That is just the way life works.” The possibility that others could forget “Ashley” and her memories elicits profound pain and sadness for “Laura.” To prevent the world from forgetting “Ashley” and postpone the inevitable, “Laura” has created a garden, donated to charities, set up scholarship funds, gotten a tattoo, and found other creative ways to include “Ashley” into her life narrative. “In honoring her memory...just remembering her, keeping her...in our lives.” By engaging in these activities and rituals,

“Laura” has discovered a method of incorporating her daughter in people’s lives and the world.

### **Textural Description for “Kathleen”**

There were six textural themes that emerged from the 70 meaning units identified in “Kathleen’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The six textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, (c) honoring my child’s memory, (d) remembering and including my child, (e) strengthening my connection to my child, and (e) unexplainable phenomenon.

#### **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

“Kathleen” has maintained a connection to her son, “Adam,” through the use of dreams and positive memories. These dreams began immediately after her son’s death and were described as vivid representations of how she remembers his personality to be, “eccentric” and “quirky.” She did not find these dreams upsetting, but rather viewed these dreams as an opportunity to maintain her connection to him. “I felt like he basically told me in these vivid dreams that he’s sorry” and that “he feels bad about what happened.” She explained that even though her son is in a “better place,” he is still “recovering” and “healing” from the emotional and psychological pain that he experienced prior to death, “He’s still in recovery, which may be why I haven’t had as much contact. That is where I think he’s at based on my dreams and what I felt from him.”

Despite the limited contact with her son, “Kathleen” understood that her son is continuing to work on “feeling comfortable with [himself] and being happy.” She

described concern that he “still goes through Hell sometimes,” and remarked that “he’s still got me in his life.” As a parent, “Kathleen” struggles with the desire to have contact with her son and allowing him to work on his development individually. “I don’t want to keep my son too much, but I don’t know if I’m keeping him from anything. I don’t know.” Nevertheless, she concluded that “my son is always just a part of my daily life.”

Remembering positive memories and reflecting on her relationship with “Adam” has helped “Kathleen” maintain a connection to her son. When thinking about her son, “Kathleen” experiences a distinct closeness to him. “I know from the minute I wake up in the morning to the time I go to bed at night, I feel that he is a thought away.” Furthermore, she explained that “if I want him to know something, I just think about it.” “Kathleen” defined her connection to “Adam” as a “spiritual connection” that is “based on my personal beliefs before and after his death.” These beliefs are grounded in her spirituality and the connection that she experienced with her deceased brother years prior. Throughout the interview, she compared the connections between her brother and her son, “I have not had the same type or intense connection with him [“Adam”] that I had with my brother. The experiences that I’ve had with my son have not been nearly as dramatic.” “Kathleen” described her connection to her son as “subtle” insofar as, “I don’t get really concrete connections as much, but that is ok.” Given her prior connection to her brother, “Kathleen” stated that she did not feel the need to actively pursue a connection to “Adam” because, “I have much more trust” in the connection that has been established.

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

“Kathleen” has purchased various household knick-knacks that remind her of “Adam” that she has placed throughout her home. For example, “He loved cats. I have all

kinds of cat statues that I might particularly not like. I would never buy them just for me, but if it's goofy, silly, and has to do with a cat—it's for 'Adam.'" She observed that placing cat statues around the home has had a positive effect on her surviving son because the statues remind him of "Adam." In addition, "Kathleen" has decided to incorporate a Japanese theme into her garden. "I'm trying to make the garden something that he would like, like Japanese."

### **Honoring My Child's Memory**

In honoring her son's memory, "Kathleen" has created a garden in her backyard that contains specific items and things for "Adam." "I'm making this garden in the backyard for him. Like I planted him a tree, and I'm going to fix some stuff. He had specific things." She has arranged the garden in a manner that "Adam" would appreciate and even included some of his favorite things like Japanese memorabilia and items of his favorite color. "I'm trying to put a lot of green in there, green frogs, because green was his favorite color. Obviously, even the garden is green."

Another way that "Kathleen" honors her son's memory is by participating in activities that "Adam" would have enjoyed. For instance, "If there's something silly on TV that he would like—we always try—something goofy." When participating in activities that "Adam" would have liked, "Kathleen" reported an intense emotional closeness to him. "As if it was yesterday. I can feel him. I can feel the way he is...right now...his personality...just the way that it was. As if he is right here."

Through volunteering, donating, and advocating on behalf of disenfranchised youth, "Kathleen" has established a stronger connection to her son. "I started doing a lot of volunteer work, and you do that in your child's honor." She has volunteered and

advocated for suicide prevention, the homeless, and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered population. This was an important component in her journey through grief and bereavement as well as an avenue for establishing a different kind of connection to “Adam.” “I had to have something to do in his honor so to speak to make meaning out of it.” By doing outreach work and participating in suicide awareness and prevention, “Kathleen” has managed to remember and honor her son’s memory.

### **Remembering and Including My Child**

Finding ways to remember and include “Adam” in her day-to-day life serves an important function in maintaining the connection that “Kathleen’s” has with her son. She shared that, “I still try to include him in everything we do with the family.” For meals, this would involve ordering “something that he would like.” During special occasions or holidays, “Kathleen” will “set him a place” at the dining room table and “put a picture up” and “have a candle with his name on it.” During family gatherings, “Kathleen” admitted to looking for opportunities to introduce or include her son into the conversation. “A lot of people don’t bring up their loved ones, especially old fashioned families.” She believed that people are unaware or afraid to bring up a parent’s deceased child. “People don’t know you need...tell people that you need to hear your child’s name. You want to hear it. You know?”

### **Strengthening My Connection to My Child**

Even though “Kathleen” acknowledged that she did not initially pursue her connection to “Adam,” she does believe that the parent-child connection can be nurtured and cultivated. “The only way that people are going to have that is by searching inside, from within, praying about it, asking your child...” She described the importance of

cultivating her connection to “Adam.” “If I worked on having a closer relationship I’m sure I could.” For “Kathleen”, cultivating her connection to “Adam” would consist of taking “time to pray, meditate, and be alone.” She has learned over time that nurturing her connection to her son involves asking, looking, and acknowledging special moments and “signs” along the way. “If you don’t ask and you don’t look, or if you don’t acknowledge then you’re not going to have it happen.” “Kathleen” recognized that the signs that she has encountered over time are not always “clear cut” or “concrete” and have left her feeling uncertain at times. “I have moments of doubt like anybody. I’ve had moments where, ‘is my mind playing tricks on me?’” She concluded that she is open-minded enough to respond with, “maybe this was you and maybe it wasn’t.”

### **Unexplainable Phenomenon**

“Kathleen” has experienced unexplainable phenomena since the death of her son. She described these events as “signs” that leave her with ambivalent feelings, “I’m not naïve enough to believe that, ‘[It] was definitely a sign from him,’ but it might have been.” One sign that occurred early in her grief was discovering a green crayon on the floor near her feet at an adult restaurant. “We’re not at a kid restaurant, so we start looking around and there are no crayons in the restaurant.” “Kathleen” decided to keep the crayon and placed it in the garden that she made for “Adam” because “green was his favorite color.” Later that day “Kathleen” observed another “sign” that appeared after working in her son’s garden. She was exhausted, so she closed her eyes and asked her son:

If there’s something else that you want me to put in the garden or if there’s something else that I need to do, I’m [asking] you for a sign. I close my eyes and said, “I’m not going to open my eyes until... I’m going to see something.” I’m

going to just sit here and keep my eyes closed. I kept my eyes closed. Finally, I felt this...and I kept them closed for a long time too...because I'm thinking, "Ok, maybe nothing is going to come to me." Finally, I open my eyes. Literally, about three inches from my face there is a yellow jacket. I had to move back from the yellow jacket. Then a yellow butterfly comes and lands on the bench right behind me. Then I look over and there's this yellow ball thing right in front of me. That's too much yellow. I'm going to put something yellow in your garden. It totally may not have been, but...how often when you open your eyes do you see a yellow jacket, a yellow butterfly... it was a lot of synchronistic events.

### **Textural-Structural Description for "Kathleen"**

The structures that permeate "Kathleen's" lived experience of establishing and maintaining a connection to her son emerged as perception of self and through cultivating a connection. The structures underlining "Kathleen's" perception of self can be found within her parental identity and the meaning found in being a bereaved parent. For "Kathleen", the death of her child does not signify an end to her parental role or the expression of love she has toward her son. Rather, she has discovered a way to transform the physical nature of the parent-child relationship prior to death into a nonphysical connection that is experienced on cognitive, spiritual, and emotional level. This nonphysical connection not only allows "Kathleen" to maintain a bond with her son but also presents an opportunity for her to be an active presence in his life. This profound desire to be a part of "Adam's" life underscores a fundamental need of "Kathleen's" that does not end with death. As a bereaved parent, "Kathleen" continues to pray for "Adam" and send him positive energy to facilitate his recovery. By engaging in these spiritual practices, "Kathleen" is able to maintain and experience a connection to her son that reinforces the belief that she can still be active and involved in her child's life, even though she is a bereaved parent.

The essential structures that constitute “Kathleen’s” lived experience of cultivating a connection are evident in the investment of time and energy made toward strengthening her connection to her son. For “Kathleen”, cultivating a connection to her son involved setting aside time for self reflection, meditation, introspection, and prayer. By giving attention to her own inner being, “Kathleen” is able to devote more time and energy to strengthening her connection to “Adam.” Through self-awareness she has learned that this ephemeral connection originates from within oneself and can be cultivated through an active process of remembering and honoring her son’s memory, sharing his life with others, advocating for others, donating in his name, and creating a garden that reflects his personality. When “Kathleen” engages in these activities, she experiences feelings of “happiness” and “closeness” to her son in a way that is qualitatively different from the physical relationship she had had with him. Furthermore, these activities serve the purpose of keeping “Adam’s” memory alive for “Kathleen” and other people and provide her with a strategy for integrating him into her life narrative.

### **Textural Descriptions for “Dana”**

There were five textural themes that emerged from the 62 meaning units identified in “Dana’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The five textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, (c) honoring my child’s memory, (d) remembering and including my child, and (e) unexplainable phenomenon.

## **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

“Dana” has experienced a connection to her son, “Ryan,” through vivid dreams, bodily sensations, and positive memories. She reported several dreams about her son that ended abruptly, leaving her feeling anxious and concerned. There was one dream where “Ryan” came to her and said, “Mom, I’m gone. You gotta let me go.” Remembering her desire to hold on to her son, “Dana” explained that “I was trying to put him in a can to keep him.” In a similar dream, “Dana” recalled informing her son that she wanted to live with him in Heaven. “I want to stay here. We could build a house right here. You could have your window facing that way.” Before waking up, she remembered her son responding, “Mom, you can’t stay. You can’t.” Even though both dreams ended with separation, “Dana” considers herself “very lucky because I hear of all the parents that don’t dream about their child and they want that so much.”

The connection that “Dana” has with her son has also been experienced through bodily sensations, namely olfactory and tactile. She explained that “one of the strongest things in the beginning was the smell” of her son. “I would be doing some things, and I wouldn’t even be thinking about him and all of a sudden I could just smell his smell so strong.” During those moments, “I just felt love.” In addition, “Dana” recalled moments in which she felt her son’s touch either on her hands or her shoulders. “I felt like sometimes he was holding my hand.” Occasionally, there have been times when “Dana” felt like “he had his head on my shoulders.”

Even though her son is no longer present, his physical absence does not diminish the emotional connection that “Dana” experiences. “I feel very connected to my son even though he’s not here in the physical aspect.” She explained that, “I feel him around me at

all times.” For instance, once in church “Dana” felt the desire to share her son’s love with another child. “I just feel my son’s love and feel like giving it to other people. It’s just what I feel right now.”

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

The use of physical objects permeated “Dana’s” experience of maintaining a connection to her son. She has kept many of “Ryan’s” possessions over the years, from his childhood toys to the drum sticks he used to play his favorite video game. “We always played *Rock Band* together.” A number of these items “Dana” brought to the interview such as “Ryan’s” drumsticks, Dr. Seuss books, audio CD’s, school ID badge, and cards given to “Dana” by her son. She even brought his “little obituary.” There were pictures of “Ryan” when he was younger. “This is a picture of him with Santa Claus when he was little.” When asked about the significance of the drumsticks, “Dana” explained that she often touches them “just to feel a part of him.” She acknowledged that, “I know that he’s not in there. It just brings special meaning... memories back is all.” “Dana” shared that she keeps these items in a special glass case next to “Ryan’s” ashes.

For the interview, “Dana” wore several items that she created in “Ryan’s” memory. For example, there was a double-sided metallic emblem worn as a necklace. On one side, there was a picture of “Ryan” as a young child. On the other side, an older picture of her son was engraved. The latter of these two pictures represented the most recent photo of “Ryan” taken. She has also made little buttons with “Ryan’s” face imprinted on them that can be clipped to a shirt. In addition, “Dana” has designed t-shirts with her son’s face that she frequently wears to support group meetings and out in public.

## **Honoring My Child's Memory**

“Dana” has maintained a connection to her son through the use of creative projects to honor her son’s memory. For instance, she has designed a website for her son. She explained, “[I] have a page dedicated to [him] where we’ll just write to [him] and talk to [him].” “Dana” also plans to create a memorial garden in honor of “Ryan.” “He loved gardening.” Furthermore, she maintains a connection to her son by participating in activities that he used to enjoy. These activities consist of eating at his favorite restaurant, going on “swamp tours,” and visiting stores that he loved. On one occasion, “Dana” went “owl spotting” at night in the woods because that was one of “Ryan’s” favorite activities. Using her son’s old flashlight, she laughed to herself, “I can’t believe that I’m back doing this.” She concluded that participation in these activities serve to strengthen her connection to “Ryan” and act as moments of “honoring him.”

## **Remembering and Including My Child**

Through remembering and sharing positive memories, “Dana” has maintained a connection to her son. She shared that “sometimes I’ll think about something that I haven’t thought about in awhile, a certain song we played.” “Dana” takes comfort in remembering her son and the things he used to enjoy like “walking, riding the four-wheelers, and him.” Remembering her son and the moments that they shared brings a smile to her face. “It makes me happy. That makes me smile.” When she finds herself feeling sad, “I gravitate away from there and start thinking about the good things like us staying up ‘till four in the morning playing *Rock Band*. I just gravitate toward those moments and get away from the negative.” “Dana” also finds comfort in reminding herself that, “He’s in a safe place. I never liked, ‘He’s in a better place.’”

Remembering and including “Ryan” in everyday life remains a fundamental aspect of “Dana’s” connection to her son. “Even though he’s gone, I don’t see how people can’t talk about him.” She explained further that “you talk about your children here, every day to everybody. You share their life and moments. Why can’t you share your child that’s not here, their moments that they’ve had?” “Dana” takes great satisfaction in talking about her son and sharing him with others. “I like sharing him, the stories, and everything like that with parents and even parents that haven’t lost a child. You know?” She compared the thought of not sharing her son with others to placing him in a cage. “I don’t want to put him in a cage and just look at him every once in awhile. He was too beautiful a soul to do that. I could never do that.”

### **Unexplainable Phenomenon**

There have been a number of unexplainable events that have occurred in “Dana’s” life that she attributes to her son. These phenomena include animals, elevators, and professional sporting events. For instance, “Dana” had an experience with a butterfly one afternoon at home. “As I walked through the hallway, a butterfly flew out of my son’s room and flew by the window.” She was surprised to see a butterfly in her home, in general, and curious why the butterfly was in her son’s room, specifically. She deduced that, “that’s him come by to tell me hello.” Another unexplainable event occurred immediately after “Ryan’s” funeral and involved his dog, “Sorbo.” “Dana” was sitting on the picnic table in her backyard when “all of a sudden ‘Sorbo’ came and just stopped and looked up. He started playing, going round and round, wagging his tale. I believe a hundred percent that “Ryan” was there in that moment, and that he was playing with

“Sorbo.” He passed away a couple of months later.” She concluded that “Sorbo” was with “Ryan” in Heaven, playing with one another.

The third unexplainable phenomenon occurred on an elevator at a hospital while visiting her step-daughter. She explained that, “I went into the elevator to get my friend; the elevator went up to seven and then it came back down, hit the bottom floor, then it stopped on two.” When “Dana” hit the button again, “it went back up to seven, then we went back down and he passed at 7:27. I think that was something. I don’t know if he was trying to tell me it was the right thing. I don’t know.”

The final unexplainable event occurred while watching Monday Night Football and involved two professional football players. “Dana” explained that she was having a difficult day and was “crying and crying.” In the midst of her tears, she asked her son for a sign. “My sign is [Player 1] is going to play [Player 2]. I just want him to touch him, just to clip him. If he does that, I know it’s from you.” The next morning “Dana” discovered that her wish had come true as evidenced by the photograph on the first page of the sports section. She described this event as surprising because “they hardly ever play against each other.” “Dana” attributed the event to her son. “I felt like he was telling me hello. I felt happy. You know? Impressed that he made such a big thing happen.”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Dana”**

The structures that permeate “Dana’s” lived experience of establishing and maintaining a connection to her son emerged as interconnectedness, self in relation to physical objects, and relation to others. “Dana’s” sense of interconnectedness can be found within the emotional properties of the parent-child attachment after death and the psychological closeness that she experiences to “Ryan” through dreams, smell, and

physical objects. In the beginning, the reoccurring dreams and the intense feelings of euphoria experienced upon awakening provided “Dana” with a sense of inner peace, love, and connectedness to “Ryan.” During this time, the reoccurring nature of her dreams and smelling her son’s scent became so profound that she felt his presence deep within her being. The inner experience of feeling connected to her son illuminates the profound depth and power of the parent-child attachment. For “Dana,” the sense of interconnectedness reverberates through the deepest regions of her soul and is experienced at the core of her being. On an existential level, “Dana” has discovered a way to incorporate a part of “Ryan” into who she is as a parent and a human being.

Over time “Dana” has become aware that the physicality of the parent-child attachment, while desirable, is not necessarily sufficient in and of itself to form and maintain a connection to her son. “Dana” has discovered that she can form and maintain a connection to “Ryan” through dreams, memories, reflections, eating his favorite food, and participating in activities that he once enjoyed. When engaging in these activities, “Dana” is able to keep “Ryan’s” memory alive and experience a psychological closeness to him that has otherwise been circumvented by death.

In regards to self in relation to physical objects, “Dana” relied on a number of “Ryan’s” personal possessions to maintain a connection to him. These items included childhood photographs, audio CD’s, Dr. Seuss Books, and the drum sticks used to play *Rock Band*. The latter of these held significant meaning for “Dana” because they were once used by “Ryan” and her when playing their favorite game. The significance of “Ryan’s” drumsticks can be found in the indescribable closeness that “Dana” experiences to her son and the profound memories evoked whenever she touches these drumsticks.

While “Dana” is aware that these drumsticks do not contain any magical or spiritual properties, she has a strong desire to touch them and use them to feel close to her son. These drumsticks, therefore, have become a physical means in which she can experience a connection to “Ryan” and remember the two of them together playing *Rock Band*.

The structural theme of self in relation to others reflected the difficulties among bereaved parents in navigating the challenges of social discourse concerning discussions of deceased children. For “Dana,” there was a sense of confusion and uncertainty surrounding social discussions of deceased children and society’s lack of awareness to the importance of bereaved parents sharing their deceased children with others. She has found that talking about “Ryan” and sharing positive memories of her son with others has helped her overcome these social challenges. For “Dana,” talking about and sharing memories of her son not only keeps “Ryan’s” memory alive but also wards off one of her greatest fears: the fear of forgetting. Even though “Dana” acknowledges that she will never forget her son, the persistent fear of life continuing on without “Ryan” remains in the back of her mind. “I think that is somewhat what I fear—that we’re going to forget what they smell like. We’re going to forget what it felt like to hold their hand, play *Rock Band* with them.”

### **Textural Description for “Karen”**

There were three textural themes that emerged from the 82 meaning units identified in “Karen’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The three textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, and (c) unexplainable phenomenon.

## **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

The connection that “Karen” has to her son, “Luke,” has been experienced through dreams, positive memories, smelling his scent, feeling his presence, and receiving encouragement, support, and guidance from “Luke.” In the beginning, “Karen” experienced difficulty having dreams of her son. “I was struggling with not being able to dream about ‘Luke.’” She described her first dream as a “very powerful dream” that felt “real.”

I had a dream and it was real. I saw Luke in the midst of all loved ones. He was glowing. And he looks up and he runs to me. He holds me. It was so intense. I woke up thinking that my husband was holding me. I literally felt his hands around me. I looked over and Stan was not in the bed. He was already up and had gone to work.

The embrace between mother and son that “Karen” experienced holds special meaning for her because she discovered “Luke’s” body after the suicide. “I found my son. I could not hold my son because of the position that he was in.” “Karen” shared this dream with her sister only to find out that her sister “had the same dream two days before, down to the same letter.” She interpreted the occurrence of this dream not as a coincidence but rather as an affirmation. “This would affirm, in my mind that what I experienced was true.” “Karen” expressed gratitude for the opportunity to dream about her deceased child. “I know that this doesn’t happen to everyone. I feel very gifted that I’m able to share” my experiences with others.

The role of positive memories has provided “Karen” with an opportunity to maintain a connection to her son. She described these memories as leaving her with “intense strength” and feeling “hopeful.” She explained that, “We always think about how he was and what he could have been, so that makes us feel better.” “Karen” has

decided not to focus on the painful thoughts of the suicide. “We never dwell on what happened. Even though we are sad, talking about it...we’re saying good things.” By focusing on the positive memories, “I don’t have these horrible memories of finding my son. It’s not there in my brain.” Furthermore, “Karen” has relied on photographs of “Luke” that she found after his death to help strengthen the positive memories. “This picture has helped me replace it. You look at that smile on his face and he’s glowing.”

In the beginning of her grief journey, “Karen” had a profound experience of smelling her son’s cologne one morning at daily mass. She remembered that there were only five or six people in attendance at this “huge church,” so she elected to sit at the back of the church. “I always sit on the last pew...in case I needed to get up and leave.” “Karen” described kneeling down and smelling his cologne. “I smelled my son. I had my eyes closed. It was so strong that Abercrombie smell.” She recalled that Abercrombie was the only cologne her son would wear. She remembered thinking to herself, “Somebody is wearing the same cologne that my son wears.” When she opened her eyes, “there’s no one behind me.” Initially, “Karen” was unsure about the significance of the event. “At the time I was brokenhearted because it was very early in my journey. As time as gone on, I realized...they never leave us.”

“Karen’s” experience of feeling her son’s presence is deeply rooted in her spiritual beliefs. “My journey with “Luke” has become an extremely spiritual journey.” She described a spiritual connection to her son that she experiences on a daily basis. “Our children never leave us. They walk daily with us, moment by moment.” Even though “life is never going to be the same again without ‘Luke,’” “Karen” takes comfort in knowing that “he walks so closely with [me].” She believed that because deceased

children are spiritually connected to their bereaved parents that “they know what we need.” Furthermore, “Karen” has recognized over time the ubiquitous nature of the parent-child connection after death. “They can be with several other people because [they] become God-like.”

Before “Luke’s” death, “Karen” did not consider her son to be a bold person. “‘Luke’ was not a bold person. His earthly life was quiet. He did not want attention on himself” However, since his death, “Luke” has become bolder in her experiences with him. “There’s not a doubt in my mind. “Luke” has been extremely bold.” The boldness “Karen” referred to has come from the “intense thoughts” and “affirmations” that she has experienced from her son. For instance, soon after “Luke’s” death, “Karen” experienced “flashbacks” while cleaning the floors in her home. She was thinking about her son and his sufferings when she experienced “intense thoughts” that were “clear” and “direct.” These thoughts were from her son. “Mom I have gone ahead of you. My purpose in life, on earth, was already done. I have gone ahead of you to pray for ya’ll and to bring ya’ll home to be with me.” “Karen” defined these thoughts as “my whispers.” She believed that these whispers “come into your head...from the Holy Spirit. Our Lord allows are deceased to speak with us, to give us these thoughts.” On a separate occasion, “Karen” experienced these “whispers” while driving alone in her car. “I was going around the corner and I was whispered in my head that by offering up our sufferings you can release...those in purgatory. “ She told the Lord, “I’m going to give up my sufferings... this broken heartedness... the desire to go ahead and live, to try and release any of my loved ones that could possibly be trapped in purgatory.” “Karen” recalled that as soon as she had these thoughts, a flock of white birds immediately flew from a near-by dead tree.

In her connection to her son, “Karen” has also experienced encouragement, support, and guidance from “Luke.” She described him as her “guardian angel,” because “He looks after us. He’s up there.” “Karen” explained that the encouragement and guidance received from “Luke” came after she experienced a “spiritual awakening” at church. She remembered praying for “guidance” and “human intervention” soon after “Luke’s” death. “Karen” explained, “I was being lead very early to give up my desire to try and save him on this side.” Once she surrendered this desire, “Karen” began receiving “affirmations” and “whispers” from her son. “Karen” acknowledged that other people may consider these “affirmations” as coincidences; however, she interpreted these experiences as her son saying, “I’m walking with you, mom.” For “Karen,” these affirmations underscored “Luke’s” bold nature and have encouraged her to be bold. “I will be very bold in showing his story.”

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

Through the use of photographs and picture frames, “Karen” has maintained a strong emotional and spiritual connection to her son. During the interview, “Karen” presented several photographs of her son that she either discovered or were given to her by family members after “Luke’s” death. “Karen” acknowledged that all of these photographs have helped strengthen and maintain her connection to “Luke.” The first photograph presented was taken the year of his death as a junior in high school. This picture evoked strong feelings of regret for “Karen.”

Regret that I didn’t have enough time. You know? More time to spend with him. That human part of us, you know, we always want more. More time. Just to me, we always wonder if we gave enough of ourselves as a parent.

Despite the feelings of regret, “Karen” concluded that this photograph reaffirmed the

closeness that she experienced in their relationship.

The second photograph produced was of “Luke” and his siblings on Easter Sunday, a week before his death. In the picture, “Luke” was standing in the middle of his sisters with his arms around each sibling. “Karen” pointed out his “long dark sideburns” and his new haircut, “He had just gotten his haircut in the picture. He had cutten it really short.” She pointed out the “star in the background” and made reference to “Divine Mercy.” She described the picture as “a gold value with a star. It’s almost angelic like when you look at it.”

The final photograph presented was the very “last picture taken of my son.” “Karen” defined this picture as “my saving grace” because it depicted her holding “Luke,” something that she was unable to do at his death. “This [was the] last picture of me holding ‘Luke.’ I was unable to hold ‘Luke.’ When I found him, I went into hysteria.” She concluded that discovering this picture after his death was a “major affirmation” to both the love she experienced and where he is today. “I know where my son is. The suffering is over.”

While each photograph of “Luke” was carefully placed in its own separate frame, there was one particular photograph that was enclosed in a special frame. This frame was purchased by her daughter while “Karen” was in attendance at a local support group for bereaved parents. “Karen” recalled her daughter’s surprise upon discovering this particular frame because of the biblical scripture inscribed at the bottom of the frame. This scripture was adapted from the Book of Exodus and resembled the “whisper” “Karen” received from “Luke” several weeks prior. “I am sending you an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared for

you.” “Karen” understood this frame to be a “major affirmation” of “Luke’s” presence in her life and the connection that they share. Because of the profound meaning associated with this frame she has decided to share them with family members. “I actually bought several of these and gave them to my mother and sister and shared with them the experience attached to this frame.”

### **Unexplainable Phenomenon**

There have been a significant number of unexplainable events and experiences since “Luke’s” death that “Karen” has attributed to her son. These unexplainable events involved animals, visions, people, and dates that she considers “major God moments” and “affirmations.” For instance, “Karen” recalled a “really bizarre experience with redbirds” one morning while sitting on her front porch drinking coffee. This experience occurred within the week of her son’s death. She was experiencing intense grief, crying out and talking to “Luke,” when all of a sudden “the first redbird comes and lands. It was a bright redbird, and then another one comes. Before long there were twenty male redbirds underneath my magnolia tree.” After sharing this experience with a friend, “Karen” was informed that “cardinals are territorial. Things like that don’t happen.” Similar to her experience with the flock of white birds, “Karen” interpreted this phenomenon as “Luke” expressing his “boldness” and telling her that he continues to walk closely with her.

Early in her grief, “Karen” experienced a profound vision after returning from morning mass on her son’s nineteenth birthday. She was in her car, alone, driving back home.

I left my home in total darkness. I was coming around the corner, and I am in pain. I am in suffering. This is my son's first birthday without him. As I'm coming around the corner, I start seeing in front of me colors like I cannot begin to describe. Purples, greens, blues. The sun is not up! I left in total darkness. It is in my frontal vision. I look where the sun should be coming up, but it is all across my windshield. It is a panoramic—I open my sunroof and it was above me. It was a panorama pre-dawn sunrise.

This “extremely powerful experience” left “Karen” feeling uplifted as it confirmed her belief that her son was in Heaven. “Yes, ‘Luke,’ I know where you are at.” She explained that many Baptists believe that suicide is a sin and that those who die from suicide go to Hell. “But ‘Luke’ was showing me, ‘Mom, no!’”

The anniversary of “Luke’s” death represents an amalgam of unique and meaningful experiences for “Karen,” therefore, she named this day “Luke’s Angel Day.” For instance, this day marks “Karen’s” wedding anniversary and the birth of her first grandson, “John.” Despite the medical complications, “John” was born healthy and “to the hour that “Luke” took his life.” She described the similarities between “John” and his Uncle “Luke.” “He’s a spitting image of ‘Luke.’ My grandson has the amazingly long eye lashes just like his Uncle ‘Luke.’” Furthermore, two years after “Luke” took his life in their home, “Karen” and her husband decided to sell the house. Regardless of the internal problems of the home and its location, an interested buyer found and purchased the home on “Luke’s Angel Day.” When asked about the meaning of this event, “Karen” refused to believe that this was a coincidence. In fact, “Karen” stated, “Luke’s prayers have been said.”

“Karen” recognized that most people would associate the anniversary of their child’s death with “pain and suffering.” However, she described “Luke’s Angel day” as

an opportunity for unexplainable experiences and being to people that have had similar experiences, either with suicide or mental illness. “Karen” recalled an experience with a priest at a spiritual retreat in which the priest sensed her “intense pain” and told her, “I know why I am here doing this retreat. It is for you.” He provided “Karen” with education on mental illness and suicide and explained to her the life that “Luke” could have lived with mental illness. “Karen” learned about survivors of suicide from this priest and defined this experience on “Luke’s Angel Day” as a “major God moment.” Furthermore, “Karen” has had the experience of being led to other bereaved parents while being on family vacation or on business with her husband. “I find these things happen to me all the time.” She has also had the experience of encountering people with the name of “Luke.” “You are suffering so intensely from the loss. [When] you turn around...we would run into people with the name of ‘Luke’ everywhere.”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Karen”**

The structures that underscore “Karen’s” lived experience of establishing and maintaining a connection to her son emerged as bodily sensations, spirituality, and self in relation to physical objects. The first structure, bodily sensations, manifested through the physical sensation of experiencing her son’s embrace and, on a separate occasion, smelling her son’s scent at church. Through these bodily sensations “Karen” experienced a profound emotional closeness to her son that left her feeling comforted and at peace. The first sensation, physical touch, occurred immediately after her first dream of “Luke.” Prior to the dream, “Karen” had been preoccupied with thoughts of her son at the time of his death and her inability to hold and comfort him during this time. This dream provided her with the opportunity to embrace her son for the first time since his death.

The physical sensation that emerged from this embrace was so powerful that it woke her from sleep with the thought that “Luke” was there, holding her in bed.

On a separate occasion, “Karen” experienced “Luke’s” presence while visiting the church that he had attended school. The fact that “Luke” attended this church and that “Karen” was on a spiritual journey holds particular meaning for her and illuminates the profound nature of this sensual experience. During worship service, “Karen” elected to sit on the back pew of the church, away from other members of the congregation. It was at this time that “Karen” experienced her son’s presence through the smell of his cologne. The scent of her son’s cologne as a conscious experience from the back of the church created a spiritual connection between self and child that affirmed her belief that “our children never leave us.” “Karen’s” belief that the physicality of death does not preclude bereaved parents from having a connection to their deceased children has helped her maintain a connection to her son. Throughout her journey of grief, “Karen” has learned that the parent-child attachment not only exists in the physical world but can be experienced through an emotional, cognitive and spiritual connection.

The role of spirituality is interwoven throughout “Karen’s” narrative and serves a distinct purpose in the establishment and maintenance of the parent-child connection. Spiritual elements are deeply embedded within the structures of her experience, presenting a conceptual understanding of how “Karen” experiences the parent-child attachment as a cognitive and spiritual connection. During periods of stress, sadness, confusion, or loneliness, “Karen” experiences “intensive” thoughts from her son. She refers to these thoughts as “whispers” from her son because they provide her with encouragement and insight into the afterlife and reaffirm the parent-child connection.

“Karen” experiences comfort, peace, and strength through these “whispers,” which have helped her remember the positive qualities of her son and the good times that they shared. Furthermore, these “whispers” have assisted her in dissociating herself from the negative thoughts and “horrible memories of finding my son.” Consequently, the anniversary of “Luke’s” death does not mark the “pain and suffering” commonly associated with the death of a child. Rather, “Karen” has discovered a way to remember and honor her son by finding new meaning in the anniversary of “Luke’s” death. In essence, “Luke’s Angel Day” marks a day of possibilities for future encounters with her son and affirms his continued involvement in her life.

The third structural theme, self in relation to physical objects, manifested as the profound emotional connection that “Karen” experiences to her son through photographs and the scriptural picture frame. These items were presented to the interviewer, and the meaning “Karen” ascribed to these photographs included: “reaffirming,” “angelic,” “my saving grace,” and “the last picture taken of my son.” Each photo described a storey of “Luke” and evoked both smiles and tearfulness in “Karen.” By viewing and sharing these pictures, “Karen” is able to keep “Luke’s” memory alive both in her life and in the lives of others. Furthermore, the act of sharing “Luke” with others provides “Karen” with the opportunity to relive and re-experience her connection to “Luke.” This re-experiencing of the parent-child connection can be found in the fundamental meaning ascribed to the scriptural frame given to “Karen” by her daughter. The scriptural message inscribed in this frame reaffirms the validity of the “whisper” that “Karen” received from “Luke” and serves as a concrete representation of her connection to “Luke.” By reflecting on and

sharing the meaning of the scriptural frame, “Karen” is able to strengthen her connection to “Luke” and find a way for the world to remember him.

### **Textural Description for “Sarah”**

There were five textural themes that emerged from the 58 meaning units identified in “Sarah’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The five textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) honoring my child’s memory, (c) remembering and including my child, (d) strengthening my connection to my child, and (e) unexplainable phenomenon.

#### **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

The connection that “Sarah” has to her son, “Garrett,” has been experienced through dreams, positive thoughts, and by talking out loud to him. The experience of dreams have served “Sarah” in creating and maintaining a connection to “Garrett” throughout her bereavement journey. “I dream about him a lot.” In addition to dreams, “Sarah” has learned that the role of thoughts, either positive or negative, can serve a vital role in establishing and maintaining a connection to her son. She believed that other bereaved parents can experience a positive connection to their children if they focus on “happy thoughts” and the “good things” in their life. “I think that they can have that connection if they think of the good things.” She admitted that her thoughts of “Garrett” have been positive. “He’s in a good place. He’s in Heaven. He’s well. He’s taken care of.” “Sarah” could not recall any negative thoughts about her son. “I just don’t have any negative thoughts of “Garrett.” I don’t. I don’t think that’s being idealistic or think that you’re not really seeing the big picture.” She reported that receiving positive comments

about “Garrett’s” gentle and kind nature from others has been helpful in sustaining these thoughts. “Too many people have said that he was nice.” By reflecting on “Garrett’s” positive qualities, “Sarah” concluded that it “brings up happy things” like previous holidays, celebrations, and experiences with her son.

On the other hand, “Sarah” acknowledged the role of negative thoughts in preventing a connection to her son and has encouraged bereaved parents not to dwell on the negative or their child’s absence. “If they always think about the bad and how he died, I felt like that’s like a wall or barrier preventing them from—you have to accept that they are not here any longer, but that they were still their child.” She argued that “Garrett’s” physical absence does not deter her from having a connection to him. “He’s still my son, even though he’s not here with me. He’ll always be.” She explained that the power of love transcends death and that bereaved parents can continue to have a connection to their deceased children. “They can love them still, even though they are not physically there. They can still love them every day.”

Talking to “Garrett” and sharing her daily experiences with him has become another way that “Sarah” has maintained a connection to her son. She explained that she does this often, especially when experiencing a bad day or when she misses “Garrett.” “I talk to him all the time, just randomly in the car. “Oh, ‘Garrett.’ I’m having a bad day today. [I] sure wish you were here.” Furthermore, when faced with a problem or challenge, “Sarah” finds it helpful to ask her son for feedback. “I will say sometimes, ‘Garrett, how do you feel about that? Tell me, I want to hear.’” She will then listen for a response. “I’ll turn the radio off. I’ll really think inside of myself, ‘Can I hear you talking?’” “Sarah” explained that “talking in good ways” to her son has been helpful in

experiencing a connection to him. If, for some reason, “Sarah” believes that she has offended him in some way, she will apologize to him and offer him a hug. “I was wrong in doing that. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry. If you were here I would give you a big hug.” “Sarah” remained optimistic about her connection to her son and shared the hope that this connection will continue to grow over the years. “Hopefully, [I] will have a deeper connection with him the more that I go through this process.”

### **Honoring My Child’s Memory**

Finding ways to honor “Garrett’s” memory has been an important aspect in the maintenance of “Sarah’s” connection to her son. By finding ways to “help other people,” “Sarah” has managed to honor her son’s memory and do things for others in a way that recognizes “Garrett.” She has come to recognize that being “angry” and holding on to other unhelpful emotions may “diminish his presence” and, in turn, dishonor his name and memory. Furthermore, “Sarah” believed that “Garrett” would not want her to be unhappy. “I think ‘Garrett’ would want us—me—to go on and have a good life.” She explained that “Garrett” admired and loved her fiancé and that he would want her to be happy. “He wants me to marry and...be helpful to other people.”

Mother’s Day marks a special moment in her life and a time in which she experiences a strong connection to her son. Each year on Mother’s Day her fiancé sends her a card with a special note written on behalf of “Garrett.” “Sarah” recalled the first one that she received. “Hi mom! I miss you. You were a really good mom.” She cried as she shared that each card contains “those sorts of things a mom wants to hear.” One year her fiancé wrote, “I hope you have a great day today” and signed the card “Garrett.” While the hand written messages received from “Garrett” have become more general over time,

“Sarah” expressed gratitude toward her fiancé for making these days special. “[It’s] nice that he does that.”

### **Remembering and Including My Child**

Remembering and including “Garrett” in her life has remained an essential component in “Sarah’s” connection to him. One way that “Sarah” has found to remember and include “Garrett” is around the holiday season. “He loved Thanksgiving.” “Sarah” explained that, “We’ll always eat things that he liked to eat, tell jokes that he would have liked, or just say something funny about ‘Garrett.’” During New Years Eve, the family gets together and reminisces about “Garrett” and shares funny and entertaining stories about him. There is one particular story about “Garrett” locking himself out of the house and having to break in during the middle of the night. When the family gets together, members of the family will often ask one another, “Oh, gosh, I wonder if anyone is breaking in any windows tonight.” “Sarah” smiled through tears as she stated, “We never dwell on what happened. We always think about how he was and what he could have been, so that makes us feel better. Even though we are sad, talking about it...we’re saying good things.”

“Sarah” is also able to remember and include “Garrett” in her life by remaining in touch with his old friends and learning about things he used to do with his friends. She remembered that his friends were hesitant at first to talk about him after his death.

I would try and comfort them and say, ‘No, don’t ever feel like you can’t ever talk to me about Garrett. I want to know stories that ya’ll did on a Friday night. What did ya’ll use to do? What kind of music did he like? Where’d ya’ll go? What trouble did you get into that I don’t know about?’ Things like that.

“Sarah” explained that hearing old stories about “Garrett” from his friends presented her

with a rare opportunity to learn about another side of her son—a part of his life that she was not privy to before he died. She described this experience as “a connection—a continued connection with “Garrett.” That’s what I want. I guess through seeing people and stuff like that it helps me have that.”

This continued connection that “Sarah” experiences through “Garrett’s” friends has also extended to acquaintances of his that she has met over the years. When “Sarah” meets these acquaintances, she often inquires into the nature of their relationship with “Garrett” and the impression that he had on them. “I would ask her, ‘How did you know ‘Garrett?’ What did you think of ‘Garrett?’ Tell me.’” Listening to the stories and learning about “Garrett” through the eyes of other people has confirmed for “Sarah” that her son was important and that he has left a positive impression on others. “Sarah” recalled a particular young lady that introduced herself and shared her experience of meeting “Garrett” for the first time and how accepting he was of her pregnancy.

I knew that whenever she was telling me this, I just knew that this was Garrett. That didn’t sound strange to me, you know, that he would have befriended somebody like that. You know? And forgetting his own problems and helping someone else. So I thought, ‘God, if he had that impression on her’ and then she turned around and was able to tell me about it, then it was a good feeling for her too. She didn’t have any negative feelings like, ‘Oh, are you Garrett’s mom? He was an asshole. I hated him.’ You know? Things like that. That made me feel good that she could take it on through life and pass it on from someone else. It made me feel like maybe through me as a mother, maybe I was able to instill that in Garrett to where he could give it to someone else in a way.

When asked about this experience, “Sarah” stated that, “It warmed my heart” to hear such wonderful things about her son. “Sarah” explained that these connections “help me learn another side of ‘Garrett’ that I might not have known as a mother.” Through experiencing these connections, her belief that “Garrett” was a good person is confirmed.

“I guess I just need those connections in a good way. To help me feel good that—I know that ‘Garrett’ was a good person, but that other people think he’s a good person too. You know?”

The experience of learning about another side of “Garrett” leaves “Sarah” with a positive feeling that she wants to share with her son. Therefore, she frequently visits his gravesite and brings special things to place on his grave and shares her encounters with his old friends and acquaintances. One day, while visiting his gravesite, “Sarah” found a picture of a little girl that she didn’t recognize and wondered if someone who knew “Garrett” left the picture for him. “Sometimes people would leave things that I wouldn’t recognize as being for me or anyone I knew. “ She described the feeling as a “good feeling” that “someone else has been to visit” and was “remembering ‘Garrett.’” “Sarah” would tell her son, “Garrett, look there is another person that misses you.” She explained that, “It just makes me feel good that somebody else cared about him.” Knowing that other people haven’t forgotten “Garrett” and remember him as a good person is important to “Sarah.”

For me, to make sure that everybody still remembers Garrett...in a good way. Not...that he committed suicide. I don’t want them to remember that. I want them to remember that he was a good kid and that he was fun and, you know, that’s what I want [them] to remember.

She acknowledged that neither she nor her surviving children will ever forget “Garrett,” yet she feels the need to make sure that others remember him. “I’m not ever going to forget him, so I don’t know why I should ever make a big deal on that day as opposed to any other day. But I do.” “Sarah” concluded that “maybe I just do it for me. Maybe that’s it.” Through tears she recalled a painful memory of forgetting what her son’s voice

sounded like after asking him a question.

What was bad at that moment was when I couldn't remember what his voice sounded like anymore. That really hurt. You know? That was bad. I wish I would have had like a tape recording or voice message that I could have replayed over and over... just because that's one more connection. So I lost that, I feel like. But I still have Garrett. But that was something that you could physically reach out and touch. You could hear his voice. But I don't have that, so...

### **Strengthening My Connection to My Child**

Over the years, "Sarah" has discovered several methods of strengthening her connection to "Garrett" that she has recommended to other bereaved parents. The most helpful of these strategies have been "prayer, speaking with him, [and] just talking to him in good ways." These methods have been helpful for "Sarah" in maintaining and strengthening her connection to her son. She admitted to engaging in these strategies quite frequently in the beginning; however, she expressed disappointment that she no longer receives a response from "Garrett." "Now I don't see them as often, maybe because I'm not looking. I don't know."

Another strategy that has been helpful in strengthening "Sarah's" connection to "Garrett" has been forming connections with people who once knew her son. For instance, she recalled a recent incident whereupon an old classmate of "Garrett's" used Facebook to locate "Garrett's" sister, "Stacey." "Sarah" remembered the confusion that she experienced when "Stacey" was not interested in pursuing that connection. "It wasn't important to 'Stacey' to contact him as it was for me to get another connection to "Garrett." You know? That was another connection to "Garrett" where I could say, 'What do you know about him?'" Even though "Sarah" described this experience as "another connection that I need," she remained uncertain of the reason why she doesn't actively pursue this connection. "I didn't take it upon myself to go through Facebook to find this

person. I don't know why I don't pursue things like that."

### **Unexplainable Phenomenon**

Throughout "Sarah's" journey through grief and bereavement there have been a number of unexplainable phenomena that have occurred that remind her of "Garrett." She has interpreted these phenomena as signs that "Garrett" is still present in her life and that he is ok. For instance, "Sarah" has experienced several unexplainable encounters with trucks on the highway that were similar to her son's truck. "I'll see trucks that look like his on the road." The first incident occurred soon after "Garrett's" death when "Sarah" returned to work.

I was leaving [for] lunch one day. At a stop light, this truck pulls beside me. The exact same color, exact truck with a young fellow in the car that looked similar to Garrett's—looked just like him. I had to glance twice. I was like, "Oh my god!" He just looked over and smiled and then drove off. I was like, "Oh my gosh, that was—." You know? I felt like it was maybe Garrett's way of saying that, "I'm ok." It was just so vivid. It was like him in the truck, not in a creepy way. He just looked over and smiled and then drove off. Like, "I'm ok, don't worry."

She observed that these encounters with trucks on the highway do not occur as often as they did in the beginning. "I use to see them often right afterwards. Now I don't see them as often, maybe because I'm not looking." Nevertheless, every time "Sarah" encounters a truck that looks like "Garrett's" old truck she is reminded of him. "I just kind of smile. 'Garrett's' all right." These constant reminders of "Garrett" extend to social encounters with "gentlemen that look like him." When "Sarah" observes young men with a similar physical appearance as "Garrett," she often wonders about the person he would have become. "What would he look like now? Twenty-three? Twenty-four? What would he be doing?"

"Sarah" reported several other unexplainable phenomena that have occurred

while either driving on the highway or in town, whereby either she or her daughter have had a near death experience. She attributed surviving these close encounters to “Garrett” looking after her safety and the well-being of her daughter. “I feel that if I avoided an accident in some way that it was because ‘Garrett’ did that.” “Sarah” reflected on one particular encounter that nearly resulted in a head on collision.

I was driving down the road and this guy ran this stop sign. I swerved and there was another car coming. I think that if the timing would have been different I would have hit that car. Things would have been so different. Well when I pulled off, the first thing I said was, “Oh Garrett. Thank you. Thank you for taking care of me in that way, diverting things.”

“Sarah” shared other examples of “Garrett” intervening in various situations to protect his sister, “Stacey,” from harm either at home or on the highway. She described situations in which “Stacey” “aborted an accident” or “fell and didn’t get hurt.” “Sarah” would inform “Stacey” that, “Oh, well, I guess ‘Garrett’ was looking out after you. He didn’t want that to happen.” Given the significance of these events, “Sarah” has concluded that “Garrett” has become a “guardian angel” for both “Stacey” and herself. She acknowledged that viewing “Garrett” as a “guardian angel” may be the way that she has coped with her son’s death. “Maybe it is just my way that I have coped with “Garrett” not being here with me and that he’s still here with me.”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Sarah”**

The structural themes that underlie “Sarah’s” lived experience of having a connection to her child include relation to self as a parent, self in relation to others, and fear of forgetting. The first structural theme, relation to self as a parent, emerged as a self-reflective process for “Sarah” in terms of her parental identity and the formation of an attachment bond with her son. The transition in becoming a bereaved parent has been

difficult for “Sarah” and has left her with many existential questions that permeate her sense of self. For instance, “Sarah” contemplated whether or not she considered herself a “good parent” and if she fulfilled her duties and responsibilities as a parent. The constituents of this experience can be found in “Sarah’s” strong need for constant reassurance from others that she was not only a “good parent” but that her son was a “good kid” before he died. This need for reassurance has been satisfied through the positive feedback from others, gifts left at “Garrett’s” gravesite, and the Mother Day cards received from her fiancé on behalf of her son telling her that, “You were a really good mom.”

As “Sarah” journeys through grief and bereavement, she has reflected on what it means to be a bereaved parent. For “Sarah,” being a bereaved parent means discovering a new kind of connection to “Garrett”—a parent-child attachment that surpasses the physical world. She has learned that, as a parent, she can continue to love her child and experience him in the physical world despite his physical absence. “He’s still my son, even though he’s not here with me.” The psychological experience of establishing and maintaining a connection to her son is experienced through dreams, positive memories, remaining in contact with “Garrett’s” friends, and talking and sharing her daily experiences with her son. She has learned that reflecting solely on the negative memories and the suicide itself creates a “wall or barrier” that prevents her from experiencing a connection to her son. Therefore, she has chosen to remember the positive memories and experiences that she once shared with “Garrett.” In essence, the positive memories not only keep “Garrett’s” memory alive but it also serves to strengthen “Sarah’s” connection to him.

The second structural theme, self in relation to others, emerged as a change in the perception of others and concern over their thoughts and feelings towards “Garrett.” Through social interaction, “Sarah” has learned that other people may possess valuable knowledge about “Garrett” that she may not have been privy to before his death. The parental need to learn about the various facets of “Garrett’s” life has motivated “Sarah” to embark on a quest to discover new information about her son. When “Sarah” encounters friends and acquaintances of “Garrett,” she is internally driven to inquire about their thoughts, feelings, and impressions of her son. The purpose of this behavior is not only to discover another side of “Garrett” but also to ensure that “Garrett” was, in fact, a “good kid.” Even though “Sarah” has learned that “Garrett” has left a lasting impression on those he left behind, there remains a persistent fear of discovering that he wasn’t the “good kid” and the truth surrounding the suicide. The penetration of fear into “Sarah’s” consciousness has kept her from actively pursuing all prospective “connections” to “Garrett.”

The fear of forgetting “Garrett” was interwoven throughout “Sarah’s” narrative and reflected a pervasive fear within her and in the world that life would continue without her son. The former of these two fears was evident at the moment that “Sarah” became aware that she could no longer remember the sound of his voice. “I couldn’t remember what his voice sounded like anymore.” The feelings associated with this experience were deep pain and hurt. At that moment, “Sarah” became aware of how tenuous her connection to “Garrett” had become and longed for a recording of his voice because that would have been “one more connection.” To manage her fear of forgetting her son and strengthening the connection between them, “Sarah” has discovered ways to establish and

maintain other connections to her son. These connections include honoring him, volunteering in his name, reflecting on positive thoughts, and sharing fond memories, jokes, and funny stories about “Garrett” with family and friends. These experiences not only strengthen “Sarah’s” connection to her son but reinforce her belief that he was a “good kid” and that he continues to be important to others.

### **Textural Description for “Mary Beth”**

There were five textural themes that emerged from the 60 meaning units identified in “Mary Beth’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The five textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, (c) honoring my child’s memory, (d) remembering and including my child, and (e) unexplainable phenomenon.

#### **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

“Mary Beth” has experienced a connection to her son, “Charlie,” through dreams, physical sensations, and hearing the sound of his voice. Her dreams of “Charlie” began soon after his death. “I had a dream about a month after this happened because I was very angry at God.” In the dream, “Mary Beth” recalled that, “God was holding him while he did it...and it was almost like he caught him. It just brought great peace over me.” Even though “Mary Beth” remains unsure of the meaning of the dream, she has concluded that “‘Charlie’ is ok. He is where he needs to be.” A second dream of “Charlie” occurred about six months after his death. “I dreamed that we were in the Wal-Mart parking lot, and he was driving.” “Mary Beth” recalled the feeling that she felt upon closing the car door. “I remember shutting the door and how you feel when you’re awake shutting a

door.” She described this dream as “amazing” and “emotional for him and me [sic].” She remembered both of them screaming, “Oh my gosh, here you are” before running toward one another and embracing. “I felt like he was saying, ‘This is where I am at now and I miss you, but this is how it’s going to be.’”

In her connection to “Charlie,” there have been several occurrences in which “Mary Beth” has felt her son’s presence either emotionally or through physical sensations. She provided a rich description of her experience in reaching out and touching his leg and feeling the “texture of his skin.”

There are times now where I can reach over and put my hands where his leg would be. It’s almost as if I can feel the hair on his legs. It’s that real. I can be completely fine and then something comes over me that makes me feel like I need to put my hand over there...and I’ll just bust out crying. The emotion just floods over me. I just—it’s almost like an electric charge. I just feel him.

She reflected on the “bittersweet” thoughts present at that moment. “I miss you. I wish that I could really touch you.” On a separate occasion, “Mary Beth” recalled sensing her son’s presence in the back seat of her car after returning from a vacation. “I don’t know...because many times on the trip I had drove the whole time, and I would turn around and not really see him, but feel him in the back seat.”

The experience of hearing the sound of “Charlie’s” voice began relatively early in “Mary Beth’s” journey through grief. During the first year, “I might hear something in the house.” She questioned, “Charlie, is that you?” “Mary Beth” admitted that, “It doesn’t scare me. I don’t have a fear about it. He wanted to be so close to me.” She explained the meaning that she has found in her son’s voice.

I can hear him say things like, you know, some people think they hear God’s voice. You know? I hear him. I don’t really hear him getting onto me, which I’m sure he could. Mostly I hear the positive reinforcement like, “You did a great job.

Thank you.” It’s like he’s thanking me.

During the holidays, the sound of her son’s voice gives her reassurance, especially when she experiences emotional discomfort. “One minute I could hold up his t-shirt and just break down. The next second I could hear him saying, ‘Mom, this is really cool.’ You know? I was proud that I was open and that I did something from my heart.” Moreover, “Mary Beth” remembered hearing “Charlie’s” voice on the morning of his first birthday after his death. “I woke up that morning...hearing his voice when he was three or four years old saying, ‘Momma’ just as plain as day.” She explained that “it brought comfort just to hear.” There was a qualitative difference in the sound of his voice and the manner in which he referred to her as he grew older. “In his older childhood, he would always say, ‘Hey Mom.’ But when he was little he would call me, ‘Momma.’ It was just very comforting.” She recalled that, as a young child, “Charlie’s” voice had an *endearing* quality to it.

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

“Mary Beth” has also managed to maintain a connection to “Charlie” through the use of physical objects. For her, the most significant object and reminder of her son’s suicide was her home. “I have become protective over the house a little bit.” Even though she decided to remain in her home, “Mary Beth” described the emotional need to be physically close to the place where her son died.

I have to stand right where he was lying every day—in my bedroom, right by the closet. I just feel like I need to be there...where he lived and breathed and died. I just want to be close to that. That doesn’t mean that I won’t ever leave, but right now that is where I want to be.

After “Charlie’s” death, “Mary Beth” discovered his childhood journal that she gave him at the age of seven. The purpose of the journal was for “us to write back and forth” and to help him “make sentences.” She described this journal as “beautiful” because it was filled with his writings and personal notes exchanged between the two of them. When “Mary Beth” found the journal, “I thought it was perfect that I would pick this back up.” She reflected on the origins of the journal and whether or not there was any deeper spiritual meaning in discovering the journal after “Charlie’s death.” “It’s cool to think back. It was like God had set this up from a long time ago. He knew how important this would be.”

“Mary Beth” has also found “comfort” in creating things for other people using “Charlie’s” personal possessions. For instance, one Christmas “Mary Beth” and her mother decided to make scarves out of the sleeves from “Charlie’s” “favorite jacket.” She explained that, “We have pictures all over the place of him in this jacket.” She described the meaning behind the process of creating these scarves. “We purposely made the scarf so that when you put it [on] his sleeve is around your neck and it’s just...like he’s hugging us.” When wearing one of these scarves, “Mary Beth” is left with a “very comforting feeling.” She exclaimed, “I wear mine all the time.” Furthermore, the comforting feeling that “Mary Beth” experiences when wearing her scarf extends to observing other family members adorning one of these scarfs. “Mary Beth” admitted that these scarves were gifts “for the girls in the family to be able to actually put it on their bodies, a part of him.” For “Mary Beth,” the act of reflecting on this experience has her excited about the upcoming winter season. “I almost can’t wait for winter to come around because I’m ready to pull it back out.”

## **Honoring My Child's Memory**

As a bereaved parent, “Mary Beth” decided to honor her son’s memory through the creative arts and participation in community activities. For example, one creative and artistic endeavor was getting a tattoo with her daughter. “We both got tattoos to honor ‘Charlie.’” In addition, “Mary Beth” elected to join the National Suicide Prevention Coalition as a way to honor “Charlie” and help other suicide-bereaved persons. While she considers herself a “non-professional,” “Mary Beth” is the only parent with personal experience of losing a child to suicide. She remembered the first time speaking in front of the organization. “I feel very motivated to help.” However, “Mary Beth” expressed ambivalent feelings towards talking about her son’s suicide. “Sometimes I kind of feel bad for talking about all of this because...it’s dishonoring him a little bit.” She believed that her reluctance to discuss her son’s suicide in front of others is a “protective thing.” Nevertheless, she concluded that, “I think that at the same time he is proud of me for being strong and trying to make the best out of it.”

“Mary Beth” was inspired to reach out and help other bereaved persons in honor of “Charlie.” “My heart immediately...was to help people in my situation to be able to remember their loved ones.” She searched the internet for places and people who were bereaved and that created “memory quilts” or other memorabilia to honor their deceased loved ones. “I couldn’t find anything. There was nothing there. It really bothered me. It was really disappointing because I thought...there has to be someone else out there like me that is looking for this too.” After many unsuccessful attempts, “Mary Beth” decided to open family owned business in honor of “Charlie” that focused on creating memory quilts and other things for bereaved families. “We are creating things, we are crafting

things.” Unfortunately, the store has not had the success that “Mary Beth” had hoped for. “People are busy in their lives and haven’t had the time. We are volunteering our time to do this.”

### **Remembering and Including My Child**

By remembering and including “Charlie” in her life and in the lives of others, “Mary Beth” has managed to maintain a strong connection to her son. She has accomplished this through creating scarves out of her son’s belongings and giving them as gifts at Christmas, talking about and introducing her son into social conversation, and sharing her personal experience and journey as a bereaved parent. “Mary Beth” described the creation of the scarves from “Charlie’s” “favorite jacket” as a “healing” experience. “It was very healing because of the emotions. I had pushed myself through this bad situation. I could see the end of the tunnel.” She reminded herself, “If you can get through this, it’s going to be awesome.” “Mary Beth” remembered her niece’s reluctance to wear the scarf because of its sentimental value. “Aunt ‘Mary Beth’ I’m not ever going to be able to wear that.” “Mary Beth” explained that, “Baby, that’s why I gave it to you. That’s why I made it. It’s something that you can wear.” By giving these special gifts at Christmas, she is able to ensure that family members have “a part of ‘Charlie’ for everybody to hang on to from then on. You know? That was a gift from my heart and I know that he loved it. I know that ‘Charlie’ thought it was cool.”

A fundamental part of “Mary Beth’s” connection to her son can be found in talking about “Charlie’s” life and sharing her personal experiences with others. “Mary Beth” argued that, despite “Charlie’s” absence, she continues to talk to him. “I talk to him like I use to talk to him.” For “Mary Beth,” there is a strong desire or need to talk

about and share her son with others. “I want to talk about my son. He was awesome.” She explained that “Charlie” “had [this] cute little smile that just melted you, and he continues to do that now.” Furthermore, if “Mary Beth” encounters an unusual experience that she attributes to “Charlie,” she will immediately share it with those around her. “[I] emailed everyone and said that I wanted to share it because it was so beautiful.” She recognized that, “This is where life has taken me, so I might as well make the best out of it.” There is, however, a fear that one day she may forget her son. “Mary Beth” explained, “We have this automatic fear of forgetting. Of course, I’m a mother. I do hope that I will never forget, but that fear is still there.”

### **Unexplainable Phenomenon**

“Mary Beth” has experienced a significant number of unexplainable phenomena that have occurred since “Charlie’s” death. These unexplainable occurrences began the day of “Charlie’s” funeral. “We were in a limo leaving the church parking lot and three jets flew over the church...exactly on the path of where the cemetery was.” She explained that “Charlie” wanted to be a pilot, and the fact that the jets passing overhead occurred mere seconds before entering the limo left the entire family in “shock.” She remembered thinking to herself, “Did somebody do that on purpose? Do you know somebody who would have set this up?” She later concluded that the jets were a message from either God or “Charlie.” “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m still here with you guys. Thank you for honoring me.” “Mary Beth” described feeling a sense of “relief” that “I didn’t completely lose him. That he was still going to be there from here on.” She also experienced a “peaceful” and “reassuring” feeling that “[the connection] will continue and that he will always be a part of all that.”

After “Mary Beth” returned home from the cemetery, she encountered an unusual phenomenon of random items disappearing in the home. The first item to disappear was one of her son’s two bracelets. “Charlie” had a set of bracelets that he frequently wore, which was returned to her by the mortician. She had placed these on the coffee table. While talking to family members, “I looked down and saw one of the bracelets were gone. It’s gone. We never found it.” She concluded that, “[“Charlie”] took it just to be ornery.” She remembered her son’s “ornery” personality. “He always had something up his sleeve.” For example, while “Mary Beth” was out of town, family members decided to help her by cleaning and rearranging things at her home. Before leaving, she told her family about the missing bracelet. “While you’re cleaning and moving stuff, if you find it...because I’m looking for it.” When “Mary Beth” returned, she learned that her sister-in-law’s pair of pliers had disappeared during the cleaning. “They had a pair of pliers that they had just set down to do something, and they turned around and they’re gone.” Similar to “Charlie’s” bracelets, the pliers were never discovered. “I never did find it.” “Mary Beth” acknowledged that, initially, she suspected the cat; however, she has her doubts. “If it was the cat, you would think that it would turn up.”

During the first week of mourning, “Mary Beth’s” mother had stayed with her to offer comfort and support to her. The morning after “Charlie’s” burial service “Mary Beth” experienced an unexplainable phenomenon that left her feeling connected to her son. She remembered waking up to her mother coming into her bedroom announcing, “God covered ‘Charlie’ in a blanket of snow.” “Mary Beth” was surprised at the sudden change in the weather. “It wasn’t even supposed to snow. There was nothing in the forecast.” She described the beauty of the snow. “It was the most beautiful snow that I’ve

ever seen. It was like silver dollar snowflakes. They were huge.” While observing the snow flakes, “Mary Beth” experienced a general sense of “peace.” She remembered the large amount of snow that morning and how it had broken a limb on a tree near “Charlie’s” window. “I have a huge tree in my front yard, and one of the main branches had broken. It was right where ‘Charlie’s’ bedroom window was. I was like, ‘Really?’ You know?” When asked about the significance of this event, she responded, “I just felt like it was representing me. It was like my hearts broken, and the tree couldn’t take it anymore. I felt like maybe it was confirmation of how I was feeling.”

While “Mary Beth’s” mother was staying with her, there was another unexplainable phenomenon that occurred involving her cat. She was lying in her bed one morning when all of a sudden her cat came into the room, jumped up on her bed, and started playing with the wall. “My cat came in...there was something on the wall moving. She played with whatever it was for four or five minutes. She’s pouncing with her paws on the wall and jumping up.” “Mary Beth” admitted that, “I have never seen her do this” and that “I don’t look for these things.” Both “Mary Beth” and her mother giggled to one another and said, “Hey ‘Charlie.’” At that moment, “We just felt his presence.”

“Mary Beth” continues to feel her son’s presence in the home, particularly when she notices that the furniture has been moved. She mentioned that “my daughter is freaked out about it and won’t talk about it.” “Mary Beth,” on the other hand, is convinced that the rearranged furniture is a sign from “Charlie” and a reflection of his “ornery” personality. “I’m just very nonchalant about it, ‘It’s just Charlie.’”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Mary Beth”**

The structural themes that underscore “Mary Beth’s” lived experience of having a connection to her child include relation to self as a parent, bodily sensations, and fear of forgetting. The first structural theme, relation to self as a parent, emerged as an internal conflict between two opposing, yet equally intense emotional states, self-doubt and confidence. The constituents of self-doubt are present in “Mary Beth’s” perception of self as a bereaved parent and the overwhelming feelings of guilt from her son’s suicide. She is plagued by guilt and in need of constant reassurance that she was and continues to be a good parent. To allay these feelings of self-doubt and guilt, “Mary Beth” takes comfort in reminding herself that “Charlie” is proud of her and approves of the creative projects that she has designed in his honor. “I know that he loved it. I know that ‘Charlie’ thought that it was so cool.” Furthermore, the words of encouragement and support received from “Charlie” through dreams, thoughts, and unexplainable phenomenon reinforce “Mary Beth’s” perception of self as a loving, caring, and nurturing parent.

The experience of bodily sensations in “Mary Beth’s” connection to “Charlie” illuminates the profound nature of sense perception and the emotional closeness that she experiences through unexplainable phenomenon, and auditory and tactile stimulation. “Mary Beth” provided a rich description of her experience and the realness of reaching out and touching her son’s leg. This experience entered her conscious awareness as an “electric charge” that allowed her to feel the hair on his legs as a physiological sensation. Similarly, the sensation of hearing her son’s voice throughout her grief journey has afforded “Mary Beth” the opportunity to experience her connection on a cognitive and spiritual dimension. Her awareness of the sound of “Charlie’s” voice is so profound that

she is able to differentiate the time period in which his voice originated from, thereby evoking memories of “Charlie” as a young child or an older child. Through these bodily sensations “Mary Beth” is able to experience an emotional and spiritual connection that elicits feelings of peace, relief, hope, and reassurance that her son will continue to be a part of her life. The final structure of “Mary Beth’s” experience, fear of forgetting, emerged as an inescapable presence in the background of her narrative. The existence of this fear did not present itself until “Mary Beth” referenced the unexplainable phenomenon of jets passing overhead on the day of “Charlie’s” funeral. The meaning that “Mary Beth” extrapolated from this phenomenon was that “Charlie” would continue to be involved in her life and that she didn’t completely lose him. Despite this conclusion, she reflected on the “automatic fear of forgetting” her son. The physical absence of her son was difficult and painful to acknowledge; however, through creativity, donating and advocating in his honor, sharing his possessions, and talking about and sharing him with others, “Mary Beth” has discovered a way to keep his memory alive and her connection to him.

### **Textural Description for “Melissa”**

There were three textural themes that emerged from the 80 meaning units identified in “Melissa’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The three textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, and (c) remembering and including my child.

## **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

“Melissa” has experienced a connection to her son, “Phillip,” through thoughts, vivid memories, and imagination. “I feel like I have maintained a relationship with ‘Phillip’ because he’s very often in my thoughts.” She explained that, “I’ve developed early on things that would remind me of ‘Phillip.’” For instance, one hot summer day “Melissa” and her husband felt a cool breeze while working outdoors. Her husband concluded, “That’s ‘Phillip’ sending a breeze...to relieve our misery.” She has adapted that thought as a reminder of her son. “If there is a sudden cool, comfortable breeze that reminds me of ‘Phillip’ doing something nice for me. If he could do that then he would.” Another example of a strategy that “Melissa” developed to remember “Phillip” regards finding spare change lying around, specifically dimes. During his childhood, “Phillip” had accidentally swallowed a dime. “For no apparent reason, he put it in his mouth and was rolling it around, and he swallowed it.” Now when “Melissa” discovers a dime on the ground or under her seat in the car, she immediately thinks of “Phillip.” Contrary to her sister’s belief that “Phillip” is responsible for leaving her dimes, “Melissa” considers this a “coincidental thing” that primes her to remember “Phillip.”

I like that it’s a trigger to think about Phillip and bring him into the moment with me. I’ll be cleaning out the car, and there will be change. It will be all dimes. You know? I’ll think, “Well, if Phillip were here, would he be helping me clean out the car? Would he be impatiently waiting to borrow the car?” You know? What would that be like?

The relationship that “Melissa” has with her son can be considered in some ways “static.” She explained that, “I remember him and relate to him as he was in the month that he died. You know? His frame of mind, his maturity level, things like that.” For example, “Phillip” died before he learned how to drive. “I will imagine that if ‘Phillip’ were alive

I'd have him drive me somewhere, so that I could be doing something else while he's doing the driving." Furthermore, "Melissa" wondered how the relationship with her son would be different if he had lived. "He would be maturing. He would dress differently than he did. He wouldn't be seventeen. He would probably wear his clothes differently. He might respect me more, or he might respect me less." "Melissa" described the complex and developing nature of her relationship with her son:

I try and keep my attitude toward him...I don't know. What's the word that I want? More dynamic than just enshrining this one vision of...how he looked. How he behaved. How he emoted. I think...I want to build on the process of maturing that he was in at the time of his death. When Phillip died he had been becoming more self-controlled. I want to bring him along in my heart that way. The relationship that I have with Phillip right now is less volatile, but not less passionate.

Establishing and maintaining a connection to "Phillip" is an essential component in "Melissa's" journey through grief and bereavement. "It's important to me to have a relationship with 'Phillip' because it's important to me to have someone to relate to." "Melissa" admitted to "bouncing ideas off of him" most of the time because of the strong similarity between the two of them. She reflected on and shared her experience of relating to her son.

I think looking into what I remember was Phillip's mind gives me insight into my own thoughts, to my own feelings. But it doesn't *feel*, it doesn't seem like...I'm just talking to myself [italics added]. It really seems to me that Phillip is, even though I'm generating these...thoughts and feelings of his from my own memories. It still feels like he is a separate entity.

"Melissa's" feeling that "Phillip" is a separate entity is exemplified during moments of confusion and difficulty. When encountering such a situation, she will ask, "What would 'Phillip' do?" before concluding that, "Maybe I should do something." By considering how her son would handle a particular situation, "Melissa" is able to acquire

a “fresh outlook on a situation.” Furthermore, the act of reflecting on “Phillip’s” mind has helped her to mature and grow in her own self-development. “I like to think that ‘Phillip’ and I have both matured a little in handling our responses, our reactions to things that are going on.” For example, “If something happens that brings ‘Phillip’ to mind I think of him as being less surly and less explosive.” “Melissa” acknowledged that the afterlife remains unknown; therefore, it would be “presumptuous” of her to conclude that, “I know that ‘Phillip’ is here with me right now.” Consequently, “Melissa” has created a “construct of ‘Phillip’s’ consciousness” in order to maintain a connection to him.

I like to *make*...a construct of Phillip’s consciousness as best as I could understand it from what I knew of Phillip [*italics added*]. I’ll sometimes have him at 17, but I feel more comfortable projecting him to being 24. He would be 24 now and having him be—I don’t like to say imaginary because it really feels more real than...Phillip’s not imaginary.

“Melissa” explained that the construction of “Phillip’s” consciousness is a complex process that involves self-reflection, creativity, and knowledge about “Phillips’s” disposition.

I feel like what I’m doing is taking...lots of little bits of data, myriad memories and taking—I try to take trends in his behaviors and how I remember them being affected by other things in the environment, other people, situations, and try to put that together in a way that would be consistent with his responses that...I would like to consult with his essence about...you know?

While it would be nice if “Phillip” were here to consult with, she acknowledged that “Phillip’s” responses are self-composed, originating from within her.

I think that it doesn’t hurt me to realize that it’s my consciousness that’s generating his presence, which doesn’t mean...it would be nice to have a Phillip with me that was completely autonomous. It would be nice to have interaction with someone that had their own dynamics, but I have...become accustom to thinking and feeling for Phillip in our relationship. I realize that that is one of my chores is to take my memories and make them real, even though there is that guess work. I can’t be surprised, although sometimes it is possible to surprise

oneself.

Reflecting on the nature of her relationship with “Phillip,” “Melissa” has become aware of the physical limitations inherent in her connection to “Phillip.” She argued that the connection that she experiences to “Phillip” is a choice—one that she is unwilling to relinquish.

Having a clear relationship with Phillip...also shines a spotlight on the fact that he’s really gone. He’s really...not with me anymore in a physical presence and I miss that. So...maybe I miss that more because...keeping him so close, but I choose to have this relationship with Phillip. I think that it makes my life richer than if I tried to just...disconnect completely from him. Or disconnect moderately or in a significant way. I’m just not willing to do that.

Despite the physical limitations of their connection, “Melissa” is able to “imagine ‘Phillip’ in great physical detail.” She described the evocation of memories and images as “effortless memory” that she is “pleased” and “grateful” to have because most bereaved parents do not have these memories and thoughts. “Melissa’s” memories and images of “Phillip” are so vivid that she does not have to worry about “remembering him and getting the eyes right or wondering what facial expressions he would have.” One vivid memory that “Melissa” has is of “Phillip” hugging her. “I can remember feeling his hug. It’s a tactile memory of hugging ‘Phillip.’” Another vivid memory of hers was of “Phillip’s hair.” “I can remember how his hair smelled, products that he would use on it, and how it felt.”

“Melissa” recalled the intense nature and vivid details of her memories with ambivalent feelings. "Even though...vivid memories of ‘Phillip’ can be painful, they can also be very positive." Nevertheless, in spite of these positive recollections, there remains limitations associated with her memories. "It's nice to have that effortlessness of the memory—to have it there, but it's so incomplete because it's just a visual image. There's

no sound or smell or texture to it." She surmised that, "It's just a sliver of what was there." Moreover, "Melissa" wondered whether embracing the memories of her son or fighting against them have hindered her journey through grief and bereavement. "Sometimes I do think [that] maybe I'm thinking of 'Phillip' too much." In her experience, "If you try and fight your memories and your feelings it's more harmful, more painful. I don't know if it would actually do harm, [but] the effort is usually wasted." She continued to ponder aloud, "Sometimes I wonder if my remaining so close to 'Phillip' has made it harder on me than maybe other people's experience of losing someone."

Overtime "Melissa" has learned that even the vivid memories of her son eventually fade. "Things that...made 'Phillip' special to me have left...very vivid memories." While "Melissa" acknowledged that she would never forget her son's face, she admitted the fear of forgetting the sound of her son's voice. "I would never forget 'Phillip's' face or voice, although I worry about forgetting his voice. What if one day I forget what...it sounded like? Like when he said, 'Mom.' That would be terrible." She reflected on her son's funeral and shared her memory of receiving condolences from friends and family. "I wanted to grab them and say, 'You should have known him. You should have known my child. Your life would have been better if you had known 'Phillip.''"

"Melissa" concluded that, "I still feel that way. You should have known 'Phillip.' You would have been intrigued, at the very least, that's the very least I could say, intrigued."

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

"Melissa" has maintained a strong emotional and psychological connection to her son through the use of physical objects that either once belonged to "Phillip" or is in

some way connected to him. “I, by nature, am a packrat, [so] I found it very difficult to let go of ‘Phillip’s’ physical things that were [his].” Therefore, “I keep things that belonged to him.” “Melissa” acknowledged that many of these items may have been insignificant to “Phillip.” “I have things that for several years were left out in his room, not so much—I guess you could say enshrined, but not in any formal way. It was just ‘Phillip’s’ junk in his room.” When the family moved, it was a “big ritual” to pack up ‘Phillip’s’ things. She remembered the most difficult aspect of packing up and storing away ‘Phillip’s’ belongings was being separated from them. “It was very hard for me to have them stored somewhere where I couldn’t access them and have that external, physical memory stimulus.”

After “Phillip’s” death, “Melissa” discovered a number of photographs on his computer that was taken with his webcam. “I have a lot of pictures of him, but I didn’t have those until after he died.” Many of these photographs were taken when “he and his friends had gotten together and done some goofy things [taking] pictures of themselves dressed up as Batman...in sunglasses and hats, just goofing around.” “Melissa” brought four of these photographs to the interview and provided rich descriptions of each. While two of the photographs were taken with a webcam, all four of these photographs were taken in his room. She remarked that, “These photographs...are how ‘Phillip’ saw himself. That’s my belief.” The first photograph was a close-up picture of “Phillip” in his room. “Melissa” described her son’s facial expression as a “Mona Lisa smile.” She explained that, “It’s hard to tell what he’s really thinking. It could be bemused. It could be a melancholy smile. His face is very relaxed in it, so I think it has some of the enigma associated with the Mona Lisa.” In the second photograph, “Phillip” held a “raised

eyebrow” while being surrounded by two of his closest friends. “The quote that I would give it is, ‘This is who we are, whether you like it or not. You get what you see.’ For the third photograph, “Melissa” reflected on the meaning of his physical appearance and titled it “normal me.”

This picture of him standing in his room with his hair brushed real nice, swept [sic] back behind his ear is called “normal me” on his computer. I think that’s...how he wanted everyone, people he didn’t know—strangers—that’s how he wanted to be seen. That’s why he called it “normal me.” It’s not him goofing off or being silly or angry or any extreme of anything. It’s just him. That’s the look he wanted to portray.

The final photograph was a collage of pictures taken by “Phillip” using his webcam after he had received his new haircut. “It was shortly after he had his new haircut and had trimmed his goatee and mustache. “Melissa” titled this picture, “This is what I’m going to look like now.” She explained the purpose of bringing these four photographs to the interview. “I chose these four because...it’s the ‘Phillip’ that I wanted to show you. Maybe the ‘Phillip’ that he would like to show you.” She concluded that “those things [pictures] are precious to me because they help. They help me keep in touch.”

One particular item that helped “Melissa” keep in touch or maintain a connection to “Phillip” was a lock of his hair that she saved. “I have this huge lock of his hair that I hadn’t discarded when he died, so I kept it.” In the beginning of her grief, “Melissa” used this lock of hair to establish a connection to “Phillip” and remember him. “I thought that I would keep it and be able to take it out and smell it and be connected with ‘Phillip’ in that way.” Overtime, however, she realized that she could maintain a connection to him without this lock of hair. “At some point during this process, I started to realize that I really have vivid memories and...connection with ‘Phillip’ without these things. I’m kind of okay with his stuff being where I can’t play with it.” “Melissa” concluded that,

“Phillip’ is part of who I am.” Nevertheless, “Melissa” has not completely severed her relationship with these items out of fear that she may one day forget her son. “Even though I don’t need ‘Phillip’s’ things to remember him, I keep them for fear that my memory will one day fail and then I will need prompts to experience him.”

### **Remembering and Including My Child.**

“Melissa” has discovered that she is able to remember and include “Phillip” in her life by keeping in touch with his old friends. “That’s another way that I keep in touch with ‘Phillip’ is I keep in touch with his friends.” She explained that maintaining relationships with his old friends has helped her understand and imagine the life that “Phillip” could have had.

I see how many are changing and maturing and going on with their lives. It helps me understand that this is probably one of the reasons why I can project Phillip along with me because I have his friends changing their lives by becoming mature, responsible, having jobs, having relationships. It helps me to understand that these are things that Phillip didn’t get to do, but had he lived Phillip would be doing these things.

“Melissa” will often solicit feedback from his friends on their thoughts about “Phillip.” She will ask, “What do you think ‘Phillip’ would be doing?” For “Phillip’s” 21st birthday, she decided to invite his friends over and celebrate the memory of her son. “A couple of guys brought gifts that they would have given ‘Phillip.’ We put the gifts next to ‘Phillip’s’ ashes on the hearth, next to his urn.” She remembered the “biggest question” she had for his friends. “What would ‘Phillip’ be doing if he were alive?” One response that she received was, “Well, he’d had finally gotten his driver’s license.” On a separate occasion, “Melissa” invited his friends over to reminisce about “Phillip” and play his music. “His friends come over and play ‘Phillip’s’ guitar for me sometimes.” For

“Melissa,” the purpose of nurturing these relationships serves as an opportunity “for someone else to relive ‘Phillip’ with.”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Melissa”**

The structural themes that underscore “Melissa’s” lived experience of having a connection to her child include bodily sensations, relation to self, and fear of forgetting. The first structural theme, bodily sensations, emerged as physical and olfactory reactions in response to environmental stimuli and positive thoughts and memories of her son. Initially, these bodily sensations were triggered by “external physical memory stimuli” such as photographs, the lock of “Phillip’s” hair, and other concrete objects that once belonged to her son. The purpose of these physical objects was to help “Melissa” establish a relationship to “Phillip” and recall positive memories of her son. Embedded in these memories are the tactile and olfactory sensations of “Melissa’s” experience of hugging “Phillip” and smelling the scent of his hair and the products he once used. Overtime “Melissa” has discovered a way to integrate “Phillip” in her life in such a way that she is able to experience him as part of her being without the need for external prompts. However, “Melissa” remains unwilling to completely sever her relationship to these physical items out of fear that one day her memory will fail her, thereby requiring her to use these items to remember her son. For the present time, “Melissa” takes comfort in knowing that she can experience “Phillip” by remembering the maturing young man he was at the time of his death and “bringing him along in my heart.”

The second structural theme, relation to self, presented as a fundamental constituent of what it means for “Melissa” to be a bereaved parent and a human being. The structures that comprise “Melissa’s” relation to self can be found within the

“construct of ‘Phillip’s’ consciousness.” Given the unique and special nature of “Melissa’s” relationship to her son prior to death, she developed a cognitive “construct” or representation of her son that reflects his personality, disposition, and belief system. “Melissa” uses this “construct” as a moral compass for decision making and as a framework for resolving general life problems. This “construct of ‘Phillip’s’ consciousness” provides “Melissa” with an opportunity to relate to her son as she remembers him at the time of his death and project him into the future. Consequently, this parent-child connection becomes more dynamic than static insofar as it allows “Melissa” to draw from her knowledge of how “Phillip” behaved, emoted, and thought while incorporating a more mature, well-rounded, and self-controlled “Phillip.”

Fear of forgetting emerged as a final structure of “Melissa’s” experience in her connection to her son. While “Melissa” acknowledged that she would never forget “Phillip’s” physical appearance, the pervasive fear of forgetting other qualities of her son was always in the background. For instance, “Melissa” wrestled with the reality that one day she may forget the sound of his voice and possibly the smell of his hair. She admitted the unbearable nature of forgetting what it sounded like to hear her son call her “mom.” To manage this ubiquitous fear “Melissa” has developed strategies for remembering and including “Phillip” in her life and in the lives of others. For instance, she continues to experience and honor “Phillip’s” memory by remaining in contact with his friends, celebrating his future birthdays, and reflecting on ideas and thoughts about what “Phillip” would be doing in his life if he were still alive.

## **Textural Description for “Nancy”**

There were three textural themes that emerged from the 63 meaning units identified in “Nancy’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The three textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, and (c) remembering and including my child.

### **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

“Nancy” has experienced a connection to her son, “Brian,” through vivid dreams, smelling his scent, positive memories, writing to him, and reflecting on the resemblance between herself and her son. She reported that the dreams began soon after “Brian’s” death. “I have been dreaming about him right away, since he died.” The first dream was about her son’s suicide. “I remember the first dream. I remember walking with him and he was carrying the shotgun on his shoulder.” Aside from this dream, “Nancy” reported that “most of my dreams have been happy” She explained that “he’s happy” and that she’s fortunate to have the opportunity to “kiss him.” She remembered one dream of “Brian” when he was younger. “I had dreamed about when he was little, but many of the dreams when he was little have been...how can I say this? It’s like I worry that something is going to happen to him.” For example, “Nancy” recalled a dream where he had fallen, and she was trying to save him.

There was one dream where we were running on top of a wall. There was a very small area that we were running on, and I held him hard from the hand and then he fell. You know? It was a struggle for me to not let him go.

In a similar dream, she and “Brian” were in the ocean swimming together when he experienced difficulty keeping his head above water.

I dreamed that we were in the ocean. He was a very good swimmer. He was little this time. We were floating just fine in the ocean. The waves picked up, and then we were drowning in the ocean. I could not keep him up. I wanted to and I tried and I just couldn't.

After reflecting on the content of her dreams, "Nancy" expressed surprise and bewilderment that "Brian" has never spoken in her dreams. "He always smiled, or we hug each other. I kiss him, or he kisses me. But he has never said a word." She admitted that "what I wanted was to help him." When these dreams abruptly ended, "Nancy" would awake experiencing frustration. "When I was close to him and we would touch...when I wake up I say, 'Why didn't I hug him? Why?' You know?" If her husband interrupted one of these dreams, she would initially feel anger before expressing gratitude for experiencing a dream about "Brian."

I use to get mad at him [husband] when he would wake me up. I'd say, "I was dreaming about Brian. Let me go back to sleep." I would get back at him because...I would wake up. I don't get mad anymore. I'm just happy that I see him.

Overall "Nancy" reported having "hundreds of dreams" about "Brian," most of which have been positive. Even those dreams about "Brian" drowning in the ocean have left "Nancy" with a feeling of happiness and peace. "I wake up happy, even when I dream about the ocean and us drowning. I think, 'Why did I dream about that?' But I don't get sad, usually, with those dreams." Most of her dreams have been answered prayers or wishes from God.

God is good. The other day it was my birthday and my friend gave me a little cupcake and said, "Go ahead, blow out the candle and ask for a wish." That night I dreamed about Brian. When I ask God, many times, I dream about him. So that is a good thing.

"Nancy" shared a powerful dream that she experienced one night while sleeping in her son's bedroom.

There was this dream...we were sleeping in his bedroom that night. I wanted to dream about him. I believe in God, I have a strong faith. I asked God at night for him to allow me to dream about Brian. There's a chair next to his bed. I was sleeping. In the dream I got up, and he was sitting in that chair. I got up and...when I got close to him, he stood up and he hugged me. I hugged him so hard. I kissed him, then I woke up and I was very happy.

After her son's death, "Nancy" wrestled with the existential question of why "Brian" decided to take his own life without saying good-bye.

The night before I found the [suicide] note I had a dream. I dreamed that I was looking behind his dresser. I didn't find anything in the dream, but I was looking there. The note was not behind the dresser, but I found it the next day on Christmas Eve.

She concluded that these dreams were part of God's master plan to give her solace during her time of grief.

I believe that God wanted me to have some peace...it was a sign that I was going to find it. That gave me peace. Nothing was going to give me peace here. I knew that he could have not gone without saying something.

A second method of establishing and maintaining a connection to "Brian" can be found in "Nancy's" decision to keep his old clothes. "I have 'Brian's' dirty clothes in my house still." She admitted that she has not washed his "dirty clothes" because the scent of her son remains on them. "No, I would not wash them. I go there and smell him in there." When asked to describe her experience of smelling his dirty clothes, "Nancy" stated, "Oh, it's like smelling him. It's his scent and that hasn't changed. The clothes are still stinky and that's really good." For "Nancy," it is important that these clothes remain unwashed because of the strong smell of "Brian's" scent on them. Notwithstanding, "Nancy" does have many clean articles of clothing that once belonged to "Brian;" however, "the other ones I want them to stay with his scent, not with my scent."

Reflecting on and sharing positive memories of "Brian" have been another

method used by “Nancy” for establishing and maintaining a connection to her son. She believed that bereaved parents can continue to experience the love for their deceased children through positive memories. “I’m saying that we can move on with whatever love you have with your memories. Those happy memories because these days I don’t think about the bad stuff.” She explained that focusing on the “positive memories” have helped her accept the reason why her son chose suicide. “I don’t think he’s suffering anymore, and that is a good thing for me. I don’t want him here sick. If I had a choice to have him back with depression, I would say no.” She believed that her son is finally “happy” and is no longer “suffering.” Reminding herself that “I will see him again” and “he is not suffering anymore” has helped “Nancy” remain hopeful about her connection to “Brian” as she journeys through grief. She described her journey through grief as moving “from the sadness to the...remembrance...to the memories.”

One creative strategy that “Nancy” used to maintain her connection to “Brian” was “journaling,” specifically writing to her son. “I use to write to him in the very beginning.” While this served a purpose in the beginning of her grief, “Nancy” admitted that “I don’t do it anymore.” Nevertheless, she has taken comfort in learning to recognize the similarities between herself and her son. “He resembled me a lot, people say.” She reported that many people have told her, “Oh my goodness, he resembles you so much.” One friend advised her to reflect on her smile in the mirror. “When I wanted to see him...I needed to smile on a mirror, and I would see him.” “Nancy” concluded that, “We have the same smile.” During family celebrations, many family members will embrace one another before leaving. When family members hug “Nancy,” she believes that they are thinking about her son. “I [believe] that when they hug me they think that they are

hugging ‘Brian.’”

Throughout her grief journey, “Nancy” maintained the belief that her son is still with her.

Tearfully, she stated, “I guess only death has separated us, but still he is with me.” She elaborated further on this belief, emphasizing the importance of remembering those deceased children who are no longer a part of this world:

I think our children, our deceased children will always be a part of our lives whether we can see them or not—not to forget them. Not to think that because they are not physically here, they are not part of our families or...they are part of our families. They will always be a part of our families. He’ll always be a part of our family.

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

“Nancy” has maintained a connection to her son through the use of physical objects that either once belonged to “Brian” or was associated with him. “Nancy’s” reliance on physical objects for establishing closeness to her son began soon after his death. “I didn’t want to accept that he had died, so somehow I went to his room every day...in the morning. The first thing that I did in the morning...I touched his guitar.” She did this “every day for years.” After the air conditioner broke in the master bedroom, she and her husband moved into his bedroom. “We were staying in his bedroom, so I didn’t have to get up anymore and go there.” She remembered this lasting “four or five years.”

On “Nancy’s” cell phone, there is a picture of “Brian” as the background image so that she can see him throughout the day. “I have him on my cell phone. He is on the main screen. He’s there, in the picture.” “Nancy” shared that “Brian” was an avid baseball player, so “all his equipment from baseball” was kept. However, she struggled with giving it away to “kids who don’t have any equipment” and the stigma associated

with suicide. “I want people to enjoy those things,” but “I don’t want people to know that he’s dead or died by suicide because I don’t want people to think, ‘I don’t want to wear this because somebody killed himself.’”

While the purpose of keeping “Brian’s” “dirty clothes” served the purpose of smelling his scent, “Nancy” decided to keep his “clean clothes” in order to wear them and feel close to him. “I like to wear his clothes. I like to wear his shirts. They fit me.” Recently, “Nancy” went on a family vacation and “wore one of his shirts.” She described the intense feeling of closeness that she experienced when wearing his shirt. “It’s like him being with me. He was with us somehow.” She concluded that, “It just makes me happy to wear his clothes.”

After “Brian’s” death, “Nancy” decided to cremate him and store his remains at home in a special box. She admitted to “kissing his box every day since he died” both “in the morning” and “before I go to bed.” Being able to touch or kiss her son every day is an important aspect of “Nancy’s” daily routine.

It is the only thing that I have left of him, physically from him. It’s like...I cannot think about him being in the cemetery or being away, even though I know that he’s not alive. I know that that is just his ashes, his remains. It’s the only thing that I have left, physical that I can...touch, from him.

She reflected on the nature of her relationship with “Brian” and the feeling that she experiences from kissing his box.

I don’t know if he makes me happy. I don’t know. I want to say it makes me happy. It’s what I can do. I cannot kiss him on the cheek anymore. But that’s the closest that I can get to him, physically speaking. It’s the closest. And that makes me...it’s like I have a relationship with him. He cannot see me. He cannot hear me, but it’s what I have. That’s what I can have.

“Nancy” described the act of touching or kissing “Brian’s” box as an “acknowledgment” that she used to do “many times a day.” Now, however, simply seeing the box brings a

smile to her face. “I [may be] walking by the place where he is, and I just smile.” She admitted that, for some bereaved parents, having their deceased children in the home would be uncomfortable. “To me, [having] him in the cemetery would be painful. I think...having his remains in my house have helped.” “Nancy” has, however, debated on whether or not to bring his ashes “to visit” his grandmother who lives out of the country. She stated, “I cannot do that, yet.” She even contemplated spreading his ashes over the ocean, but “then I wouldn’t be able to kiss him. Maybe one day.”

### **Strengthening My Connection to My Child**

“Nancy” has strengthened her connection to “Brian” by introducing him into social conversation, informing others about her son, reliving memories with her husband, and providing unconditional love and care to his dog, “Bella.” She proudly stated, “I’m happy to talk to people about him.” When meeting people for the first time, “Nancy” will look for the opportunity to introduce him into the conversation and share pictures of her son. “Sometimes people who don’t know me say, ‘Oh, who is that?’ I say, ‘He’s my son.’” For those people, “I want to tell them about him. I want to tell them how he was. How smart he was, or how kind he was.” On the other hand, for those close friends and family members, “Nancy” enjoyed talking about her son and sharing her dreams about “Brian” with them. Many of her friends will ask, “Have you dreamed about ‘Brian?’” or may discuss general things related to him, such as “‘Brian’ was like this” or that. She remembered the advice that a close friend gave her. “Think as if ‘Brian’ had moved.” Initially, she thought “you’re crazy.” But after awhile she concluded that, “He really moved. He moved to Heaven.”

Reliving memories of her son and his baseball years are an important aspect of

their relationship. “Brian” played baseball at most of the major parks in town, so it is not uncommon for “Nancy” and her husband to drive near a park. In the beginning, it was emotionally difficult to reflect on and share these memories. “Now when we drive by some baseball field we are happy. We talk about it and say, ‘Well, we were here and this happened at that time, remember?’ It’s better.”

When “Brian” was younger, “Nancy” decided to get a bloodhound dog for him. “‘Brian’ wanted to have a bloodhound, so this is why we have ‘Bella.’” After “Brian” died, she recognized that “‘Bella’ has been a big part of all our grieving process.” “Nancy” remembered “Bella’s’ reaction to “Brian’s” absence. “For a long time, she would look for him. I would say, ‘Bella, where is ‘Brian?’’ and she would go to his room...not anymore.” She knows that he’s not there anymore with us.” Because “Bella” is part of the family, “Nancy” makes it a point to remind “Bella” how much they love her. “These days I tell ‘Bella,’ ‘I love you’ every single day. I don’t want to miss a chance. If something were to happen to her, she knows that I love her.”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Nancy”**

The structural themes that underscore “Nancy’s” lived experience of having a connection to her child include bodily sensations and relation to self. The first structural theme, bodily sensations, presented as a profound sensual experience for “Nancy” that was produced from her son’s “dirty clothes.” After “Brian’s” death, she decided to keep a pile of his “dirty clothes” so that she could return to these items and relive what it was like to smell her son’s scent. “I go there and smell him in there.” “Nancy” refused to wash these clothes out of fear that cleaning them would diminish or completely eradicate his smell, thereby leaving her with no physical stimulus for evoking this bodily sensation.

Therefore, the purpose of keeping her son's unwashed clothes serves as a container for "Brian's" scent and the only opportunity for "Nancy" to re-experience and remember her son's smell in the physical world. Whenever she misses "Brian" or needs to feel connected to him, "Nancy" can close her eyes, smell "his scent" from the clothes, and remember positive memories of her son.

The second structural theme, relation to self, emerged as an existential awareness of how losing her son to suicide has impacted her parental identity. The death of a child imposes certain restrictions on the duties, responsibilities, and behaviors of a parent. Regardless of these physical limitations, "Nancy" continues to define herself as a parent and embraces those opportunities to engage in loving and caring behaviors toward her son. For instance, "Nancy" experiences a physical and emotional closeness to "Brian's" remains when walking nearby, touching his box, and kissing his box. "It's the only thing that I have left of him, physically speaking." Having his remains close by has been helpful to "Nancy" in maintaining her identity as a parent. The idea of being separated from her son's remains produces anxiety and discomfort for "Nancy," even if this separation is temporary. Therefore, "Nancy" has discovered that reflecting on positive memories, sharing him with others, smelling his scent, visiting his room, touching his guitar, and recognizing the similarities between her and "Brian" have all been helpful in incorporating him into her life narrative and keeping his memory alive.

### **Textural Description for "Sandra"**

There were five textural themes that emerged from the 91 meaning units identified in "Sandra's" interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The five textural themes include (a) experiencing

a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, (c) honoring my child's memory, (d) strengthening my connection to my child, and (e) unexplainable phenomenon.

### **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

“Sandra” has experienced a connection to her son, “Michael,” through vivid dreams, positive thoughts, and a profound sense of love. The dreams of her son began soon after his death and involved an amalgam of “different dreams, not the same reoccurring dream.” A similar “theme” was embedded within these reoccurring dreams. She explained, “I was always... [on] a trip trying to go somewhere, but could never reach the destination.” “Sandra” remembered that “there was always chaos or drama” in these dreams that produced a “high level of stress” for her. When “Michael” was part of these dreams, he was “more in the background. Not so much where I could physically talk to him or whatever.” However, “Sandra” did recall having dreams in which she was able to interact with “Michael.” “On occasion, I’ll have a dream where he is actually there, and I can hug him or talk to him or see his face.” She shared one particular dream whereupon she was able to offer her son reassurance that she would protect him.

I was going to tuck him in bed, and I questioned him about it. He said, “Well, mom, I think I’m going to be ok now.” I remember hugging him tight and I said, “Well, I know that you are son because I’m going to be here with you every step of the way”

“Sandra” described this dream as a “connection” to “Michael” and an opportunity for her to “analyze herself.” She pondered aloud the meaning of these dreams. “I think that in the dreams, it is like the destination. How am I supposed to reach the destination when things aren’t like they should be? It’s not the way it should be.”

The role of positive thoughts has helped “Sandra” facilitate the process of healing

that “big gaping hole” in her life since “Michael’s” death. She admitted that her son is always on her mind. “I think about ‘Michael’ all the time.” During those moments of thought, “Sandra” experiences intense “love” and “comfort” from “Michael.” “When I think of ‘Michael,’ it’s always with love.” One positive thought that “Sandra” shared is that “Michael’s” final destination is Heaven. “I believe that if he’s not in Heaven, that he’ll be in Heaven. I believe all those things.” In spite of reminding herself of “Michael’s” final resting place, “it doesn’t make missing him any easier.”

“Sandra” reflected on the meaning of her connection to “Michael” and the feeling that she experiences from this connection. “I believe that love surpasses...time and space and everything else.” She asserted that bereaved parents can have a connection to their deceased children through the love that they experience. “Whether their child is alive or dead—I think they still have a connection with them because they loved them so much.” For “Sandra,” the profound love that she has for “Michael” has helped her establish and maintain a connection to him, even though he is physically absent. “When you love someone that deeply, even if they are not alive, that you still...you don’t love them any less because they are not here. You are still connected.”

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

There have been a number of physical objects that “Sandra” has used to establish and maintain a connection to her son. These items hold a sentimental value for “Sandra” and have been difficult to part with. “I think that most people who have lost kids never want to get rid of their things” because they want “to keep them close.” “Sandra” admitted that “it’s hard to let anything go.” One particular item has helped “Sandra” remember the sound of “Michael’s” voice and his laughter. “I have some videos, [to] hear

his laughter and his voice.” Tearfully, she explained that “those physical things...as time goes on you...lose that familiarity. You don’t want to, [so] you want to cling on to it.”

“Sandra” admitted that it has been a “struggle to hold everything close” because she does not want to lose “Michael’s” belongings.

### **Honoring My Child’s Memory**

“Sandra” has discovered meaningful ways to honor “Michael’s” memory and, in turn, remain connected to him. One method of accomplishing this was to plant a tree in “Michael’s” memory. “They [“Sandra’s” coworkers] took a collection and were going to plant a tree in his honor.” For whatever reason, these coworkers changed their mind and decided to buy her “a set of wind chimes.” “Sandra” smiled and shared an unusual experience with these wind chimes that makes her think of “Michael.”

I had them hanging in my yard. Sometimes when I’m out there and there is absolutely no breeze. When I walk under them they start ringing. I do think that it’s Michael whenever that happens. It’s one of those things that you can’t explain. I mean I don’t see a breeze. I don’t feel a breeze. I don’t see the wind moving, or leaves moving at all. And yet the wind chimes will ring.

Another way that “Sandra” has found to honor her son’s memory is through music. “He was a true musician where he lived and breathed it. Music was everything to him” Consequently, “Sandra” decided to learn how to play music, specifically the guitar. “I just started taking guitar lessons just to keep that connection, which is kind of a joke because I don’t think I could ever play like him.” She described this activity as a “connection” to “Michael” because music was ‘a part of who he was.’ Additionally, “Sandra” defined playing the guitar as something to do in “his honor” and to “keep his memory alive.”

## **Strengthening My Connection to My Child**

Keeping in touch with “Michael’s” friends and being sensitive to their needs has been a fundamental way that “Sandra” has strengthened the connection to her son. “Sometimes I’ll have his friends over...for dinner.” While some of “Michael’s” friends stay in touch with “Sandra,” others have not. “I think that his friends that truly loved him that have, some of them. I think it’s been harder to stay close to me because I’m that reminder.” For those friends who have remained distant, “Sandra” believed that it’s too painful for them. “It’s easier just not to think about it, try not to think about ‘Michael’ and put him behind and move forward with their lives instead of feeling pain, grief, guilt, or whatever. I understand that.” While she can sympathize with their pain, she is afraid that “Michael” has become just a “memory” to them.

## **Unexplainable Phenomenon**

There have been a significant number of unexplainable phenomena that have occurred since “Michael’s” death that “Sandra” described as “positive experiences.” After his death, “Sandra” decided to sell her home. The process of packing everything up in boxes was “hard” and “overwhelming,” especially “Michael’s” room. While packing up his room, she heard her fiancé “muttering under his breath to ‘Michael’...he wasn’t happy with [him] because he had caused all this pain.” When her fiancé verbalized, “You see how upset your mother is? Why did you do this?” “Sandra” noticed that the front “glass door opened on its own.” She concluded that this was “Michael’s” way of saying, “If you don’t like it, there’s the door.”

Once the family had relocated to their new home, “Sandra” recalled an unusual experience with “Michael’s” clipper set. This phenomenon occurred a “couple of months

after we moved into the new house,” so the clipper set was still secured in its case and packed neatly in a box. While out in the garage, “Sandra” heard this sound coming from the box. “I go over and open it...and the little one is on. It’s closed in the case, a little plastic case. It’s not like anything could have put it on.” She admitted that “it’s little things like that that I can’t explain.” From this experience, “Sandra” concluded that “‘Michael’ is trying to tell me that he’s still...here, somehow. That he’s ok and that he’s still a part of things.”

The most common unexplainable phenomenon that “Sandra” has experienced involves whistler ducks, whose behavior she described as “weird” and “bizarre.” After “Michael’s” death, “Sandra” sold her house and moved into a new home. “At the new house the ducks come and sit on the power line” or “on the telephone pole.” Sometimes these ducks will climb into the “big oak trees, on the limbs.” She stated, “On days when I really struggle with his death, they’ll sit on the limbs and squawk down at me.” Even though these ducks “show up at really bizarre times and places,” “Sandra” has concluded that these ducks are messages from “Michael.” “I think that ‘Michael’ is trying to tell me, ‘Hang in there, mom. Everything will be ok.’” “Sandra” believed that these whistler ducks are more than just a coincidence.

I personally think that it’s God’s way of sending me comfort because I think that...it’s one of two things, or both perhaps. I think that it’s either Michael trying to comfort me or God trying to comfort me, or both. Or God allowing Michael to comfort me. It’s one of those because it’s just too coincidental.

She reflected on the presence of these ducks in her life. “It’s just weird behavior on the ducks part that I have never seen before.” When asked about her thoughts at the moment she encounters these ducks, “Sandra” responded:

A lot of times with the ducks I'll say, "Ok, Michael. I know that you're up there somewhere. I see you over there" It's just my way...that I'm supposed to know that even in spirit just because I still love him he's still with me, somehow.

She stated her belief that these ducks are meant to give her "comfort" and reassure her that, "I'm still with you, mom. I don't want you to be sad. I'm still with you." On occasion, "Sandra" will see these whistler ducks in pairs and think of "Michael" and his best friend, who is also deceased. "Is that 'Alex' and 'Michael' flying over telling me they are ok? Are they still hanging out together?"

These whistler ducks have even appeared when "Sandra" would invite "Michael's" friends over for dinner. "I've had his friends over for dinner, and I'll see them fly over, which is kind of odd." Given the ducks "bizarre" behavior, "Sandra" is convinced that these ducks want to be seen. "They were just bound and determined that we were going to notice them because they lit in the trees and were carrying on, flying back and forth from tree limb to tree limb." She has even observed these ducks engage in a "flyover" when she walks outside to check the mailbox. "Sometimes they will fly over, really low and squawk, then turn 90 degrees and fly in a totally different direction. There is no reason whatsoever that they should come by, but they do."

"Sandra" shared that she encountered a set of whistler ducks on the way to the interview. "Actually, I saw two sitting in someone's front lawn on my way over here to meet with you." She laughed, "I stopped at the red light and look over, and there are two of the whistler ducks in their yard, not twenty feet from the road." Even though she cannot explain the frequent occurrence of these whistler ducks, "Sandra" believes that they are in some way connected to "Michael." "If he were able to reach out to me in a way, it would have had to have been something that he would have known that I would

have noticed.” “Sandra” remembered that these ducks began appearing a couple of years before “Michael’s” death and now “they are all over the place. I can’t describe it or explain it.” Nevertheless, when “Sandra” encounters these ducks she reminds herself, “Ok, ‘Michael.’ I know that you are still with me.”

Another unexplainable phenomenon involved a guitar pick and occurred while “Sandra” was on her lunch break from work. She remembered struggling with “Michael’s” death that day and left her office to go to the cafeteria. “I’m standing in line and there are two people in front of me. On the floor, in front of the cash register is a guitar pick.” She immediately thought of her son. “The guitar pick was meant for me, I’m certain of that. I keep it on my desk.” “Sandra” does not believe that the guitar pick was a coincidence. “If it was anywhere else then it would have been more of a chance of that happening, but I felt that it was very specifically [to] give me comfort that day.” She elaborated further on this unexplainable phenomenon. “In those moments, I think that these things that are to give me comfort. I can’t imagine in my wildest dreams that would have been there except...somehow...divine intervention or whatever.” She described these moments as “connections” and “gifts” that occur when she needs them the most. “It seems like on those days that I’m struggling the most...is when something like that happens to give me comfort.”

On a separate occasion, “Sandra” experienced an unexplainable phenomenon while on a family vacation. The family decided to go tubing on the river, so “Sandra” was near the edge of the river when thoughts of her son emerged. “I’m thinking about “Michael” and wondering if he had ever gone tubing down the river with his friends. I was thinking how he was missing that.” As she walked further down along the exposed

rock, she discovered a shoe half-way submerged in the water. “I look right in front of me in the water [and] the tongue of the shoe [is] sticking out of the water—one of those vans, black and white checkered shoes.” She explained that her son wore the exact same kind of shoes. During those moments, “I immediately think of him.” She believed that this phenomenon was “too coincidental,” so she asked her husband to confirm her experience. “Sandra” concluded that these checkered shoes in the water were meant for her. “I still feel a connection. I feel like he’s trying to tell me, ‘It’s ok. I’m ok, mom.’”

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Sandra”**

The structural themes that underscore “Sandra’s” lived experience of having a connection to her child include a sense of interconnectedness and fear of forgetting. The first structural theme, interconnectedness, emerged as a fundamental component of the newly defined parent-child attachment. The death of her son has created a “big gaping hole” in “Sandra’s” life that has threatened the parent-child attachment. Therefore, to ameliorate this threat and begin healing this internal wound, “Sandra” has redefined the parent-child attachment as a spiritual connection based on “unconditional love” that “surpasses time and space.” “Sandra’s” new awareness of a parent-child connection that transcends the physical world allows her to perceive the world differently. “It’s just that my eyes are open, and I see things for what they are.” While many individuals may interpret “Sandra’s” encounters with unexplainable phenomena as mere “coincidences,” she attributes a spiritual motive for these events. By defining these unusual events within a spiritual context, “Sandra” is able to experience her connection to “Michael” as part of her being.

The second structural theme, fear of forgetting, materialized from honoring

“Michael’s” memory and the connection to specific physical objects. For “Sandra,” keeping “Michael’s” memory alive is an essential element in her connection to him. This is accomplished through planting trees, volunteering, and learning how to play the guitar. These activities serve to “keep his memory alive” so that the world, including “Sandra,” does not forget who “Michael” was and the young man who grew into before his death. Furthermore, “Sandra” has formed deep emotional bonds to those physical objects that either once belonged to “Michael” or is associated with him. She recognizes, however, the parental tendency to “cling” to these items as a lifeline to “Michael.” The most important physical object, home videos, provides “Sandra” the opportunity to relive and re-experience “Michael” in such a way that is no longer possible in the physical world. These videos offer “Sandra” a qualitatively different experience than other physical objects, namely a visual depiction of “Michael” alive and the gift of remembering the sound of his voice and laughter.

### **Textural Description for “Julia”**

There were three textural themes that emerged from the 84 meaning units identified in “Julia’s” interview transcript. Each meaning unit has been extracted verbatim from the interview transcript. The three textural themes include (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, and (c) remembering and including my child.

#### **Experiencing a Connection to My Child**

“Julia” has established and maintained a connection to her son, “Joshua,” through vivid dreams, or what she calls “visions.” She explained that these “visions” of “Joshua” primarily transpire at night while sleeping and leave her feeling “peaceful.” The first

“vision” occurred at the “three month mark” of his death and involved a “visit” from “Joshua.” “In the dream...he came to the door and said, ‘I’m here.’” “Julia” was surprised to see him and responded with, “You’re dead...you’re bleeding.” She remembered her son’s answer, “But I’m here.” Not wanting to turn him away, “Julia” invited him into her home.

He came in the house and stayed all day long. There weren’t a lot of things that we did. I had to go somewhere, [so] I went. When I came back, he was still there. He did spend the whole day at the house in my dream. It was very nice.

After the dream, “Julia” was concerned about her mental well-being, so she called a support group leader. She asked, “Do you think that I’m going crazy? I don’t feel bad or good. I just feel regular.” The leader reassured her that she was fine and that “visits” from our deceased loved ones are quite common.

“Within the first couple of years” “Julia” experienced several more visits from her son. In the first “visit,” “Julia” remembered her son going to visit his grandfather. She concluded that “he was trying not to make me feel so bad because he even went and saw my father.” The second “visit” from “Joshua” evoked powerful emotions for “Julia.” “He just came to me and said, ‘Mom, I really miss my friends. I really miss all of you.’” “Julia” believed that the meaning of this dream was to apologize for the suicide. “He hadn’t taken into consideration what he had done.” The final “visit” from her son produced a disturbing and lasting impression on her. “For some reason he was in a casket with somebody else. I couldn’t see who the person was. He just kind of...sat up said that he was, ‘Ok.’”

The “visions” that “Julia” experienced support her belief that “Joshua” remains a part of her life. “He’s still part of our life. He just stopped being in it that day.” She

explained that she continues to think about him and relate to him “as if he was here.”

“Julia” elaborated further on her belief in the afterlife and encouraged bereaved parents to “realize that we *can* keep them here with us...to a point [italics added]. They’re not gone from our whole entire life. The life that they were in is still here.” She is inspired to “keep his memory here. The part of our life that he was in...with us.”

### **Connecting to My Child Through Physical Objects**

The use of physical objects has helped “Julia” experience a connection to “Joshua,” particularly certain pieces of jewelry, clothes, and pictures of her son with family. After his death, “Julia” had a “cartouche made with his name on it.” She described the “cartouche” as a bracelet with “Joshua’s” name written in “Egyptian Hieroglyphics” that she “wore for three years, every day. [I] never took it off.” When wearing the “cartouche,” “Julia” experienced an emotional closeness to “Joshua.” “It was like him being with me.” “Julia” has learned that the “cartouche” isn’t necessary to experience this emotional closeness. “Now I know that he’s there always, and I don’t have to do anything.” When “Julia” joined a grief support group, she began wearing an arm band that signified her loss. “I use to wear a band for years...that said ‘Always in my heart.’” In addition, “Julia” has collected many rings and bracelets that have “butterflies” on them. She explained that “the butterfly represents the three different phases of a person’s life: being a worm, being in a cocoon, and being a butterfly.”

For the interview, “Julia” wore a silver necklace with a round emblem that contained two etched photographs of her son, one as a young child and the other as an adolescent. “I don’t wear my necklace all the time. I didn’t want to carry any pictures today, so I thought I’d wear my necklace. Sometimes I wear it, some days I don’t.” The

etched photograph on the emblem of the older “Joshua” holds special meaning for “Julia” because it represents one of the last pictures taken of him. “This picture was taken five days before he died.” She explained that all her children decided to get together just days before his death. “I actually have pictures of all of them together on that day. The last day that they were all together.” Once “Joshua” died, she remembered the emotional difficulty in having to go through his belongings. “Then you had to deal with his things. I have some of his clothes, and she [“Joshua’s” sister] has some of his clothes.”

### **Remembering and Including My Child**

“Julia” has discovered creative and innovative ways to remember and include “Joshua” in her life’s narrative and in the lives of others. One of the first projects that “Julia” participated in was designing a suicide quilt. “When I was in this group, we made this quilt. It’s called the world’s largest suicide quilt.” She contributed “Joshua’s” clothes that were meaningful to her, such as “his high school shirt with his emblem, the emblem of the company that he worked for,” and even “Joshua’s baby clothes.” “Julia” stated, “It’s like a little deal of his life around there.” She exclaimed that, “I wanted it to be *him* on that square [italics added].” “Julia” admitted that she has never actually seen the final product of the quilt, but has intentions to see it. She has, however, received photographs of the quilt and printed pictures from the computer.

In addition to the quilt, “Julia” has designed and published several websites about “Joshua” that include pictures, poems, a yellow ribbon, the national and state flag, and “a poem that his daddy wrote.” There are also pages from the book that “Julia” and her children created after “Joshua’s” death. She reflected on the energy involved in designing the website. “It took me a long time to make the websites. I had to go in a certain

progression because I still had to work, still had to deal with my life.” One website “Julia” described as a “simple one” because it was a free site and limited to one page. She did, however, create “two more elaborate ones” that included “pictures” and “different poems about his life.” She later learned how to decorate the pages with “little butterflies across the top” and a “counter” to track the number of visitors. “Julia” reflected on the meaning of these webpage’s and how it has changed over time.

I’ll tell you the truth. I don’t look at them very much anymore. I see that their there because of my screen. There is a little icon there. Whenever somebody goes and writes on them, it sends me an email. I guess it’s just kind of like a memory thing because I don’t look at them too much anymore. I know exactly what they look like.

Before “Joshua” died, “Julia” wanted to do something with all her children that would connect them together. “We did our tattoos together before he passed away.” She decided to get a tattoo with a similar theme for all her children. “We have tattoos that match.” For “Julia’s” tattoo, she decided on a “cloud” with a “bolt of lightning going through it” and a “little butterfly in the middle.” She explained that “this is what it looked like before, when we were all still living. So that all kind of went together: the sun, the moon, the stars, and the cloud.” After “Joshua” died, “I went back and made my cloud rain. It’s raining now out of my cloud.” She also “had a little moon that looked like his [“Joshua”] put up over the cloud” and “his initials [put] besides the butterfly.” “Julia” remembered, “I had that done pretty soon after he died. My two kids were with me.” She contemplated the meaning of changing her tattoo to resemble her son’s. “It was like bringing his tattoo here to stay.”

Remembering “Joshua” is an important aspect of her connection to him, so “Julia” has discovered ways to include him during family functions, traditions, and

celebrations. “We still talk about the things we used to do.” For example, “When we use to all pack up and go to the beach, and he was there. We still talk about it. We don’t leave him out of anything.” Furthermore, “his pictures are on the wall, [so] we always talk about what he did.” For the holiday season, the family has decided to maintain their family traditions. “We carried on the stuff that we [did] before as we do now. At Christmas time, the family reminisces about previous Christmas celebrations that occurred before “Joshua’s” death. “We just talk about memories in general. He’s part of all that, so we just include him.” During the holiday season, “Julia” shared that she would visit this special place that was created for bereaved persons to go and remember their loved ones. “It’s this wall in this building [where] they have their picture, dates, and name.” She remembered going “three years...in a row” to write “dear something” about “Joshua.”

“Julia” has also participated in a lot of “symbolizing” activities or events over the year. One particular activity that stood out to her was the “peace fire.” She described the “peace fire” as an “Indian” tradition or “ritual” that involves “tobacco” and burning “wood that has been hit by lightening.” According to “Julia,” these two elements make the “peace fire” more “sacred.” One time “Julia” went into the “National Forest” to locate a tree that had been hit by lightening for the “peace fire.” She stated, “I took some wood from there and put it in the peace fire.” The “peace fire” has become an important ritual for “Julia” and her family and a way for them to remember and honor “Joshua.” “Every year we do it. Each year we bring some ashes home with us from the peace fire.”

Ensuring that family and friends remember “Joshua” is very important to “Julia,” so she continues to introduce him into conversation and make sure that the children in the

family know who he was.

I have a granddaughter that is seven years old, and she never saw him. But she knows who he is. She knows that she had an Uncle Joshua. She talks about him like she knew him once, but she never did.

“Julia” was determined to make sure that her granddaughter knew “Joshua.” “She was virtually born knowing that she had an Uncle Joshua.” When her granddaughter was four, “I took her to the cemetery, and I showed her where he was at.” “Julia” explained that before her granddaughter was born, the parents were actually considering naming their baby “Joshua,” if it was a boy. “I told them that I couldn’t handle it. It was too soon to start saying his name again like that.” Recently, “Julia” discovered that another grand-baby is on the way, and she is delighted that “Joshua” will be part of his name. “Now I’ll be able to say it without getting upset all the time. I know it.”

Encouraging other people to remember “Joshua” and the teenager he was is an important part of being a bereaved parent for “Julia.” She expressed a certain degree of fear that the world will forget him. “You think that...people are just going to automatically forget him.” She frequently has the thought, “Well, he’s gone. They’re just going to forget.” “Julia” described the power of this fear power and how she has learned to manage it.

You have to do a certain amount of things to...make you think that you’re not going to forget. You worry that you’re going to forget. You worry that other people are going to forget, so they did a lot of things like that for us to remember.

Knowing that other people think about and remember “Joshua” has been helpful for “Julia” in maintaining a connection to her son. “It’s good that people remember him.” She has found that sharing his life with others and referring to him in the present tense has helped strengthen the positive memories and keep him in the moment. “I never refer

to my son as not here.” “Julia” has acknowledged “Joshua’s” absence, yet wants to remember the life that he had. “Even though I know that he’s not here, I know that he still has his life before.” For “Julia” to refer to her son in the past tense would be to dishonor his memory. “I don’t want it to be like he was never here.” When discussing her children with people, she remains sensitive to how they may perceive and respond to her. “When we’re talking about our kids [like] when they were little, I talk about my son. I talk about him as though he were still here. I don’t refer to him as in the past tense.” She shared a brief encounter with a stranger that asked her how many children she had.

I was just explaining that I had two boys, and they were completely different. I just explained it just as it was. I never told them or acted like he wasn’t here. You know? That was just part of his life. I wasn’t going to leave him out just because he’s not here.

After reflecting on this encounter, “Julia” explained her motivation as being respectful toward the other person’s feelings. “I don’t refer to him in the past so that they won’t get uncomfortable and think, ‘Why did she say it like that?’

### **Textural-Structural Description for “Julia”**

The structural themes that underscore “Julia’s” lived experience of having a connection to her child include relation to time, relation to others, and fear of forgetting. The first structural theme, relation to time, emerged for “Julia’s” as a profound awareness to the period of time whereby her life as a parent became divided between the time before her son’s suicide and the time afterwards. “What’s changed is he’s not here now and he was before.” This line of demarcation in time marks a transitional period from being a parent to becoming a bereaved parent that “Julia” has experienced in her life. Adopting the identity of a bereaved parent has been difficult and requires a certain degree of acceptance to the finality of death in all of its manifestations. From “Julia’s” narrative, it

is evident that she has experienced barriers to this transition insofar as she continues to refer to her son in the present tense. "I never refer to my son as not here." By referring to her son in the present tense, "Julia" is able to experience her connection to "Joshua" in the present moment and keep his memory alive.

Relation to others, the second structural theme, presented as a sensitivity to and perception of the social interactions that "Julia" has experienced since the death of her son. The constituents of this theme manifested in her attitude toward others thoughts and feelings about including "Joshua" in social conversation and the desire for others to know and remember him. She purposefully introduces "Joshua" into social discourse and describes him as if he were still alive. When asked about her children, "Julia" will include "Joshua" in her response. "I wasn't going to leave him out just because he's not here." "Julia" is motivated to keep "Joshua's" memory alive, not just in her life but in the lives of others.

The third structural theme, fear of forgetting, presented as a pervasive threat to the parent-child attachment and was interwoven throughout "Julia's" narrative. Even ten years after the death of her son, "Julia" continues to be haunted by the reality that others will forget her son. "Well, he's gone. They're just going to forget." She has learned that the physicality of death presents numerous challenges, primarily the "automatic" nature of the human condition to forget our lost loved ones. She is motivated to prevent this fear from achieving its full potential by participating in and creating ways to remember her son, such as holding onto physical objects and creating websites, poems, books, and quilts. Nevertheless, "Julia" recognizes the prevalence of this fear and the reality that she, too, may one day forget. "You worry that you are going to forget."

### **Composite Textural-Structural Description**

The purpose of the composite textural-structural description is to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon as experienced by a group of participants' (Moustakas, 1994). In this section, the synthesis of textural and structural descriptions from all ten bereaved parents will be discussed with attention to the core theme that emerged from participant narratives. The essence of the shared lived experience of bereaved parents in establishing and maintaining connections to their deceased children will be described in chapter 5.

Bereaved parents reported experiencing connections to their deceased children through dreams, positive thoughts, memories, bodily sensations, spirituality, physical objects, sharing their children with others, participating in activities that honor their children, and unexplainable phenomena. Through these connections bereaved parents were able to experience an emotional, spiritual, and psychological closeness to their deceased children. While the manner that bereaved parents established and maintained these connections varied, one universal theme emerged across all ten participants. This core theme was expressed by bereaved parents as a profound desire to remember and include their deceased children in their lives.

Bereaved parents believed that “only death has separated us” and has challenged the continuation of the parent-child attachment in the natural world. Despite the physical barrier of death, these parents managed to transform their parent-child attachments into spiritual, emotional, and social connections that became part of their inner beings. This phenomenon of internalizing deceased children as part of their beings was described by several parents as their children being “part of who I am” and “part of my life.”

“Melissa” remarked that her connection has helped her to “bring him along in my heart.” This process of internalizing their deceased children represents a new form of connection that transcends the physical world. The creation of a new connection reflects a restructuring of the attachment system whereby the physicality of the parent-child relationship becomes nonexistent. As one parent stated, an “external-memory stimulus” is not required to prompt a connection to a deceased child. Rather, this new connection emerged as an intentional act of consciousness that necessitated an emotional experience for parents. This internal attachment or connection can be activated at will through deep reflection, thought, or memory.

Discovering methods of keeping their deceased children alive in a world that could potentially forget them was a motivating force for these bereaved parents. All bereaved parents in the study expressed a desire to honor their deceased children by strengthening those memories formed prior to death. As one parent remarked, “you’re not going to make new memories.” As bereaved parents experienced the profound nature of grief, there was a natural inclination to recall special moments of their children’s lives, funny stories, and shared experiences with their children. Reflecting on the memories, bereaved parents reported feelings of “peace, love, warmth, comfort,” and “happiness.” When experiencing the intensity of grief, “Dana” would “gravitate toward those [positive] moments and away from the negative.” There was concern expressed among bereaved parents that the suicide would overshadow the positive memories. For “Sarah,” it was to “make sure that other people remember [him] in a “good way, not that he committed suicide.” One parent, “Laura,” discovered ways to honor her daughter’s memory by “just remembering her, keeping her...in our lives.”

Embracing these positive memories was such an integral part of the parent-child connection for bereaved parents that the thoughts were considered “effortless memory.” For most bereaved parents, this desire was cultivated through deep personal reflection, meditating, praying, and sharing “positive memories” of their children with others. “Mary Beth” explained, “I want to talk about my son. He was awesome.” “Kathleen” was motivated to share her “stories” of her son with anyone, “even parents who haven’t lost a child.” For “Dana,” “Laura,” “Mary Beth,” and “Kathleen”, reflecting on and sharing memories of their deceased children’s lives was helpful in experiencing an emotional connection to them and keeping the memory of their children alive.

#### **Chapter 4. Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to present the data regarding the lived experiences of bereaved parents and their connections to their deceased children. Ten bereaved parents were selected and interviewed for the study. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and ATLAS.ti was used to systematically identify, organize, and manage data. Moustakas’ (1994) adapted model of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data analysis was used to answer the research question: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?”

Findings from the research study indicate that bereaved parents do, in fact, establish and maintain various types of connections to their deceased children, and the manifestations of these connections differed among bereaved parents. For instance, bereaved parents experienced their connections through dreams, positive thoughts, memories, bodily sensations, spirituality, physical objects, sharing their children with others, participating in activities that honor their children, and unexplainable phenomena.

The underlying structures of bereaved parents shared experience emerged as a universal need to preserve the memories of their deceased children and integrate them into their life narratives. Bereaved parents expressed a collective fear that their children would be forgotten, eventually becoming insignificant and nameless. To prevent this fear from materializing, bereaved parents were motivated to engage in symbolic activities that would ensure that the world would remember their deceased children.

The research findings from this study described the personal lived experience of bereaved parents and illuminated the profound nature of the parent-child attachment, particularly after death. The essence of these connections, as experienced by bereaved parents, holds important implications for clinical practice, scholarly discussions, and future research. Chapter 5 will present a discussion of these clinical implications and the relevance of the research findings in light of current research. In addition, the limitations of the present study and recommendations for future research will be addressed.

## **CHAPTER 5. RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to understand and describe the lived experience of bereaved parents who established and maintained connections to their deceased children. A transcendental phenomenological design outlined by Moustakas (1994) was used to answer the research question: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?” Moustakas’ (1994) adapted Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze data from phenomenological interviews. Research findings from phenomenological data analysis were presented in chapter 4 as individual textural descriptions and textural-structural descriptions. A composite description was provided for all participants that reflected the shared lived experience of bereaved parents and the essence within the phenomenon of forming and maintaining connections with deceased children.

A transcendental phenomenological design was appropriate for investigating the lived experience of bereaved parents in establishing and maintaining connections with their deceased children and for answering the research question: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?” Ten bereaved parents were recruited and interviewed regarding their attachment relationships with their deceased children. Findings from the study indicated that bereaved parents experienced connections to their deceased children through dreams, positive thoughts, memories, bodily sensations, spirituality, physical objects, sharing their children with others, participating in activities that honored their children, and unexplainable phenomenon.

Phenomenological data analysis of the textural and structural descriptions extrapolated from interview transcripts revealed six textural themes across participants (a) experiencing a connection to my child, (b) connecting to my child through physical objects, (c) honoring my child's memory, (d) strengthening my connection, (e) remembering and including my child, and (f) unexplainable phenomenon. From these six textural themes, four structural themes were identified (a) perception of self, (b) perception of others, (c) cultivating my connection, (d) interconnectedness, (e) self in relation to physical objects, (f) bodily sensations, and (g) spirituality. A synthesis of both textural themes and structural descriptions from participants' narratives indicated a universal need to preserve the memory of their children and prevent the world from forgetting them.

This chapter expounds upon the research findings presented in the previous chapter by examining their significance within the theoretical framework. A summary of the results will follow and a discussion of the findings in relation to the current literature will be provided. Furthermore, the essence of the phenomenon under investigation will be discussed. Clinical implications will be provided and limitations of the present study will be identified. A final conclusion to the research study will be drawn.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Attachment theory offers a unique perspective on the formation and continuation of attachment bonds within the context of bereavement. The basic assumption of attachment theory is that attachment bonds formed during early infancy serve as templates for the development of healthy adult relationships. The formation, maintenance, and continuation of these attachment bonds in parent-child relationships are

experienced and enacted in the external world. Prior to death, parents provide their children with nurturance, protection, guidance, instruction, and advice that, in turn, strengthen parent-child bonds. Even though these attachment bonds exist primarily in the physical world, these affectionate bonds are deeply embedded in parents' internal working models or mental representations of their children. These internal working models are cognitive schemes that parents form to represent the nature and dynamic of parent-child attachments in the physical world. When parents are separated from their children, they can reflect on these cognitive schemes to elicit feelings of comfort and security. The mental constituents of these schemes reflect children as being safe, accessible, and responsive to parental requests and needs for comfort, love, intimacy, and physical closeness. When parent-child attachments are threatened by actual or perceived events, whether temporary or permanent, parents experience feelings of panic, fear, confusion, and an overwhelming need to reconnect with their children. The emergence of these feelings activates the behavioral attachment system, prompting parents to actively search for and recover their lost children. Bowlby (1973, 1980) described this dynamic in a three stage model that consisted of protest, despair, and reorganization of the parent-child attachment.

During periods of stress or separation from children, parents engage in systematic search behaviors to reclaim their lost children and reestablish physical proximity to them (Bowlby, 1980). When successful, these parents experience feelings of comfort, peace, safety, and security. Death presents an unimaginable challenge for parents, preventing them from locating and recovering their deceased children. As bereaved parents transition through Bowlby's stages of protest and despair, the permanency of death and the

irrecoverable loss lead parents to revise their mental schemes of their children. The reorganization of parents' mental schemes helps them assimilate their loss into their life narrative and accommodate their children's absence in the physical world. This accommodation requires that bereaved parents transform their attachments from an external-based relationship to an internal connection. This transformational process necessitates a complex psychological reconstruction of the preexisting parent-child relationship to reflect the internal structures inherent in the parent-child attachment. Researchers have described this process as bereaved parents internalizing their deceased children to reflect the physical changes in parent-child attachments after death (Field, 2006b; Field & Filanosky, 2010). By restructuring the nature of parent-child attachments, bereaved parents are able to establish psychological proximity to their deceased children.

Findings from the study are consistent with the assumptions of attachment theory. Suicide-bereaved parents shared that continuing attachment relationships with their deceased children was important to them and that their attachments were significantly different than the relationships that existed prior to death. These parents described their present relationships with their deceased children as spiritual, emotional, and cognitive in nature. Despite the physical absence of their children, these parents were no less connected to their deceased children than before. In fact, many bereaved parents considered their attachments with their deceased children to be more intense after death because their children were now a part of their inner beings. This integration of deceased children into bereaved parents' beings is consistent with the literature on continuing bonds (Harper et al., 2011; Miers, Abbott, & Springer, 2012; Moules, 2010-2011). These parents explained that remembering their deceased children and keeping those memories

alive were the primary method of establishing and maintaining their connections to their children.

### **Summary of the Results**

The suicide death of a child is a traumatic and unimaginable event in the lives of parents that often engenders feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, failure, and confusion. As parents navigate through these difficult and uncomfortable emotions, they embark on an existential journey of self exploration and the meaning of life in a world without their children. This search for meaning in the world after losing a child introduces the question, *Why?* As bereaved parents journey through their grief, they are faced with numerous challenges from rebuilding and reinvesting in their lives to managing the difficult and complex emotions that accompany their grief. The predominant challenge for bereaved parents concerns the continuation of the relationship with their deceased children. The purpose of this research study was to understand and describe the manner in which bereaved parents continue and experience their attachments with their children.

The death of a child signifies a change in the natural order of the universe and a threat to the parent-child attachment system. Death serves as a concrete barrier that prevents parents from engaging in the instrumental roles of nurturer, protector, comforter, and advisor (Rando, 1985). Consequently, bereaved parents are faced with the formidable challenge of remaining connected or attached to their deceased children, while experiencing profound feelings of separation, loneliness, and isolation. Attachment theory has been used as a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the formation of *continuing bonds* (Field et al., 2005; Klass, 2006; Stroebe & Schut, 2005), particularly in

relation to the parent-child attachment post-loss (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; DeGroot, 2012; Kwilecki, 2011). This study adds to the body of knowledge on continuing bonds by redefining the post-loss attachment as an internalized connection that is based on parents establishing psychological proximity to their deceased children. Suicide-bereaved parents experienced their attachments with their deceased children as internalized connections that emerged through dreams, memories and recollections, sensing their children's presence, after death communication, and hearing, smelling, or seeing visions of the deceased. This finding is consistent with the literature on continuing bond expressions that recognized the continuation of attachment relationships between bereaved and deceased as common experiences throughout the course of grief and bereavement (Bennett, 2010; Kwilecki, 2011; Wood, Byram, Gosling, & Stokes, 2012).

A plethora of research exists on suicide bereavement and the subsequent effects on mental health (Boelen et al., 2006), parental identity (Thrift & Coyle, 2005), social stigma (Maple et al., 2010), meaning-making (Maple et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2008), post-loss adjustment (Begley & Quayle, 2007), the family system (Cerel et al., 2008), and grief difficulties and symptomology among survivors (Feigelman et al., 2008-2009; Lindqvist et al., 2008). Moreover, recent research on the phenomenon of continuing bonds have explored the emergence of these bonds in relation to family adjustment (Miers et al., 2012), psychosocial consequences (Lindqvist et al., 2008), parental identity (Bennett, 2010), coping responses (Price, Jordan, Prior, & Parkes, 2011), meaning-making (Kwilecki, 2011), personal mortality (Harper, O'Connor, Dickson, & O'Carroll, 2011), postmortem ritualization (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012), beliefs in the afterlife and attitudes towards death (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009), and the adaptive or maladaptive

nature of these bonds on grief adjustment and recovery (Boelen et al., 2006; DeGroot, 2012; Wood et al., 2012). Despite the substantial amount of research on suicide bereavement and the phenomenon of continuing bonds, there is a paucity of research on the phenomenon of these bonds expressed by bereaved parents following adolescent suicide. Most of the research on child death has focused on bereaved parents of children who have died from accident, natural causes, or other non-suicide related cause (Harper et al., 2011; O' Callaghan, McDermott, Hudson, & Zalcborg, 2013; Price et al., 2011; Woodgate, 2006). Therefore, a lack of understanding remains on how suicide-bereaved parents experience these bonds and the meanings associated with these connections. Researchers have recognized a need for additional qualitative designs, specifically phenomenological research in the area of suicide bereaved parents (Gudmundsdottir, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Lindqvist et al., 2008; Miers et al., 2012; Woodgate, 2006). This study addresses the gap in the literature by utilizing a phenomenological design to explore the meaning and experience of parent-child attachments among suicide bereaved parents.

A transcendental phenomenological design was used to explore the lived experiences of bereaved parents who have lost children to suicide. The shared lived experience of ten bereaved parents emerged as a profound desire to keep the memories of their deceased children alive and discover ways to include them in their life narratives. The essence of these connections is reflected in bereaved parents fear that their children will be forgotten. The emergence of this fear was expressed by parents as a conscious awareness of the possibility that their children would become insignificant and nameless. Several parents shared their own fear of forgetting certain aspects or characteristics of

their children's lives, such as the sound of their voice, the smell of their hair, or the feel of their skin. To alleviate or control this fear, parents engaged in specific behaviors, activities, customs, rituals, or ceremonies that symbolically represented their children. The purpose of these activities was to facilitate a transformational process of the parent-child attachment to reflect an internal, psychological connection predicated on emotional, cognitive, and spiritual properties. In essence, these symbolic expressions helped parents restructure the physical dimensions of the parent-child attachment system, thereby promoting a sense of interconnectedness. Through these symbolic activities, parents were both comforted and reassured that the world would not forget their children.

The significance of the research findings illuminates the dynamic nature of the parent-child attachment after death and offers an alternative conceptualization of the continuing bonds phenomenon. There exists a general consensus in the bereavement literature that bereaved parents are motivated to continue their attachment bonds with deceased children (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Maple et al., 2011; O' Callaghan et al., 2013; Price et al., 2011). However, the theory that attachment bonds *continue* after death presupposes the natural evolution of the attachment behavioral system proposed by Bowlby (1973, 1980). For the present study, attachment theory was used as a guiding framework for expanding prior knowledge on the subject and redefining the post-loss relationship as a *transformation* rather than a *continuation* of the parent-child attachment.

### **Discussion of the Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and describe the lived experience of suicide-bereaved parents in forming and maintaining attachment bonds with their deceased children. A paucity of research exists on the phenomenon of

attachment bonds within the context of suicide bereavement, specifically among bereaved parents (Gudmundsdottir, 2009; Maple et al., 2010; Miers et al., 2012). Therefore, the researcher used a transcendental phenomenological design to answer the research question: “What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?” The findings from this study provided insight into the dynamic nature of parent-child attachments following adolescent suicides.

All ten bereaved parents in the study indicated that they do, in fact, experience a connection with their deceased children. The nature of these connections varied across participants; however, there were similarities found in the presentation of these connections between bereaved and deceased. Seven of ten parents reported experiencing profound dreams or visions of their children that confirmed a connection with them. These parents described their dreams primarily as peaceful and comforting, although several participants expressed confusion, sadness, and anger after awakening from these dreams. Half of the parents reported experiencing bodily sensations in their connections to their children. These bodily sensations emerged as smelling their child’s scent, hearing his or her voice, and feeling the presence of the deceased child. During these sensual experiences, parents remembered feeling an emotional and psychological closeness to their children that affirmed the genuineness of their connections. All parents in the study identified remembering their children and engaging in positive thoughts about their children as the primary mechanism for establishing and maintaining connections to their deceased children.

Bereaved parents described their connections as positive experiences that evoked feelings of “comfort,” “peace,” “warmth,” “hope,” and “love.” When these connections

emerged as a conscious experience, parents reported a genuine sense of emotional and psychological closeness to their children that affirmed the *realness* of their experiences. For half of the parents in the study, these connections were experienced as bodily sensations that were so profound that parents believed that their deceased children were actually with them in the moment. These connections reassured parents that their attachment relationships had survived the physicality of death and would continue throughout life. This finding supports Klugman's (2006) conclusion that continuing bonds may be a "lifelong phenomenon" among bereaved persons (p. 260).

From textural themes embedded in parents' narratives, nine structural descriptions pertaining to perception of self, self in relation to others, self in relation to physical objects, relation to self as parent, cultivating a connection, interconnectedness, bodily sensations, spirituality, and fear of forgetting were identified. Together these structural descriptions provided insight into the essence within these emotional, cognitive, and spiritual connections in the lives of bereaved parents. Findings suggested that bereaved parents were strongly motivated to cultivate and strengthen these connections through remembering and reflecting on their children and the memories formed before death. Furthermore, bereaved parents shared a universal desire to talk about and share the life, memories, and accomplishments of their children with others, even non-bereaved parents. This finding is congruent with recent research regarding bereaved persons' need to talk about and share the deceased with others (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Dyregrov et al., 2010-2011; Sanger, 2008-2009). For bereaved parents, sharing was an active process that served as a mechanism for establishing emotional and psychological closeness to their deceased children and preserving the memory of their beloved children. By remembering

and sharing the lives of their children with others, bereaved parents were able to keep the memories of their children alive and manage the fear that the world would one day forget them.

Although keeping the memories of deceased children alive was a predominant theme in the present study, bereaved parents did not focus exclusively on the suicide deaths of their children. Given the traumatic and devastating nature of suicide, it was expected that a suicide theme would be interwoven throughout the bereavement narratives of parents. The absence of such a theme was surprising and may be the result of parents choosing to remember and share the lives of their children rather than their deaths. “Dana” illustrated the importance of omitting the suicidal death of her son from her bereavement narrative. “Don’t dwell on that one little part because that wasn’t theme. They weren’t in their mind when they did that. That wasn’t that little boy in that moment.” “Dana” explained that remembering her son’s life and the way that he lived has given her the “comfort” and “strength” to live each day without her son.

This study adds to the body of knowledge on continuing bonds by illuminating the structures within this phenomenon and providing insight into the meaning of continuing bond expressions in the lives of suicide-bereaved parents. From an attachment theory perspective, continuing bond expressions are largely conceptualized as an activation of the attachment behavioral system, thereby prompting the bereaved to reclaim the lost attachment figure and reduce physical proximity to the deceased (Bowlby 1980). This searching behavior is illustrated in the literature as visiting the cemetery, maintaining the deceased’s belongings, enshrining the room of the deceased, adorning the deceased’s clothes or jewelry, sharing photographs and stories of the deceased with

others, and finding ways to include, remember, and honor the deceased (Field et al., 2005; Klass, 2006; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Findings from the present study offer an alternative explanation into the purpose and meaning of continuing bond expressions within the context of suicide bereavement. Bereaved parents are not engaging in search behaviors to reclaim their lost child, but rather use these connections to maintain an emotional, cognitive, and spiritual attachment to their deceased children. These connections also serve as reassurances to parents that the world will continue to remember their children. This finding suggests that the parent-child attachment is not merely a continuation of the parent-child relationship but rather a profound transformation and integration of the attachment relationship into the core of parent's inner being.

### **Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature**

The purpose of this study was to understand how bereaved parents experience connections to their deceased children following adolescent suicide and the meanings attributed to these post-death connections. A transcendental phenomenological model illuminated the profound importance shared by bereaved parents in remembering their deceased children and discovering ways to include them into their life narrative. Through actively remembering and sharing the life of their children with others, bereaved parents were able to keep the memory of their children alive and achieve a sense of immortality for them. This need for bereaved parents to keep their deceased children's memories alive has emerged as a relatively new phenomenon in the research (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Maple et al., 2010; Miers et al., 2012; O'Callaghan et al., 2013; Price et al., 2011; Woodgate, 2006); however, research on continuing bonds among suicide-bereaved

parents of adolescent children remains non-existent. Therefore, the present findings expand prior and current knowledge on the phenomenon of continuing bond expressions by focusing exclusively on suicide-bereaved parents and their lived experiences in forming and maintaining connections with their deceased children.

Surprisingly, bereaved parents did not report experiencing the intense emotional reactions more commonly associated with suicide survivors at the time of the study. The literature described the bereavement experiences of suicide survivors as parts of unique and complex processes that involve learning how to navigate through the social, spiritual, and intrapersonal challenges of suicide (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Feigelman et al., 2009). Many suicide survivors have reported experiencing profound feelings of anger, guilt, isolation, shame, and self-blame after the death of their loved ones (Cerel et al., 2008; Owens et al., 2008). In the present study, there were several bereaved parents who denied having some of these emotional reactions. When talking about her son's suicide, "Nancy" explained that, "I could never be mad at him for that. How could I? I would never be mad at him for any reason." If bereaved parents acknowledged the presence of these emotional reactions, there was an inconsistency across time. "Sarah" identified anger as being part of her emotional experience at the beginning of her grief. "I'm not mad at him anymore. I was mad at him in the beginning because...I missed him, and I didn't have him anymore."

Given that previous research identified feelings of anger, guilt, isolation, shame, and self-blame as common emotional experiences of suicide survivors, the absence of a theme related to these experiences in this study deserves attention. One possible explanation for the absence of an emotional theme may be related to the stage at which

bereaved parents are in their bereavement process. While bereaved parents were required to be at least 1 year post-loss in order to participate in the study, the shortest duration of time since a parent lost her child to suicide was 1.6 years. The average length of time for bereavement due to suicide among parents was 5.4 years. Given the length of time since parents experienced the deaths of their children, it is plausible that parents were able to resolve their feelings of anger, guilt, isolation, shame, and self-blame prior to the study. A second explanation for the absence of a strong emotional theme concerns participants' current or prior memberships in support groups because all participants reported having either present or past affiliations with suicide or bereavement support groups. Recent or past experiences in support groups might offer parents the opportunity to address and modify these intense emotional reactions in therapeutic and supportive atmospheres.

Researchers have described the process of keeping memories alive as preserving to reflect the integration of the deceased child into the family system (Price et al., 2011). According to these researchers, the act of preserving serves a dual purpose for bereaved parents. First, preserving the memory of their deceased children helps parents create a space to relocate their children into their life narratives. This was illustrated in the present study during holidays and special occasions when parents incorporated their children into their family celebrations. The inclusion of their deceased children helped parents establish new family traditions that honored and remembered their beloved children. The second function of preservation enabled parents to maintain their relationships with their children in the physical world (Price et al., 2011). This dual purpose of preserving children's memories is consistent with the present findings that illustrate parental needs to relocate the deceased internally and in such a way that their memory continues in spite

of their physical absence. The act of remembering and keeping positive memories of their deceased children alive served a fundamental purpose in the lives of bereaved parents, namely precluding the memory of their children from becoming evanescent. Perhaps these parents feared that the fading memory of their deceased children would result in the permanent ending of their parent-child relationships and lead to meaningless existences. This is partially supported by an earlier study that found the belief in closure among bereaved parents to be equivalent to forgetting their children and relinquishing the parent-child attachments (Woodgate, 2006).

Bereaved parents have an overwhelming need to remember the lives of their deceased children. One method of strengthening and cultivating memories for parents in the study was through rituals. Parents reported engaging in various forms of rituals to honor and memorialize their deceased children. These rituals included planting gardens and trees, getting tattoos, participating in activities that the deceased once enjoyed, and creating websites, book chapters, articles of clothing, car stickers, pendants, and T-shirts. One parent even reported participating in the Native American ritual of a peace fire. Cacciatore and Flint (2012) described the emotional, spiritual, and communal properties inherent in both private and public rituals. In the present study, bereaved parents engaged in private rituals either at home or in the cemetery. These ritualistic behaviors included bringing photographs and sentimental objects to the gravesite of their children and sharing personal stories with their deceased children. For those parents who kept their children's remains at home, there was a profound need to talk to or kiss the urn of their children in the morning and before bed.

Rituals serve to mediate grief, facilitate the meaning-making progress, and establish psychological proximity to deceased children (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012). Research on continuing bond expressions has described the establishment of psychological proximity to the deceased loved one to be a natural, evolutionary process among bereaved persons (Field & Filanosky, 2010; Field et al., 2005; Klass, 2006) and is consistent with attachment theory (Stroebe & Schut, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2010). From an attachment theory perspective, death signals an end to the attachment relationship, evoking a profound emotional reaction of fear, panic, confusion, and acute anxiety in the bereaved. Faced with the impossibility of reclaiming the lost loved one and establishing physical proximity, the bereaved must revise their mental representation of the deceased to an internal attachment that reflects the reality of the loss (Bowlby, 1980; Stroebe et al., 2010). This restructuring of the internal working model allows bereaved persons to create an attachment relationship that is no longer based on physical proximity but rather an internal, psychological attachment that can be activated through remembering the beloved.

In the present study, this newly revised internal working model was the predominant method shared by bereaved parents in establishing and maintaining their attachment relationship with their deceased children. Bereaved parents strongly relied on remembering their children and cultivating these memories as a means for keeping the essence of their children alive. Previous studies have found that remembering and acknowledging their children as helpful strategies for keeping the presence of deceased children alive in the family and in the world (Miers et al., 2012; Price et al., 2011; Woodgate, 2006). Harper et al. (2010) found that this process is facilitated through

viewing memory books, photographs, physical objects, and sharing the lives of their children with others. While parents in the present study did rely on physical objects to cultivate memories, this dependency on sentimental items—either belonging to the deceased or created by the parent—was inconsistent across time. That is, bereaved parents may have relied strongly on these physical objects in the beginning of their grief to trigger a memory or feel closer to their children, but overtime this need for physical objects to prompt memories or experience connections to their children was no longer required. Parents realized that their parent-child connections could be accessed and strengthened through other means, namely remembering their children and finding ways to ensure that others and the world do not forget their beloved.

### **Essence of the Phenomenon**

Remembering their children and finding ways to weave them into their lives was universal across participants in the study. The essence embedded in the lived experience of bereaved parents emerged as an existential fear that their children would be forgotten. Bereaved parents echoed the sentiment, “We don’t want our child forgotten.” Throughout bereavement narratives, parents expressed a fear that the world would “automatically forget” their children. The enduring nature of this fear even penetrated the conscious self as bereaved parents reluctantly admitted their own fear that they, too, may one day forget their child. “I hope that I never forget him.” While these parents acknowledged the impossibility of completely forgetting their children, the fear remained in the back of their minds. Several parents admitted that they have already begun to forget certain aspects of their children, such as “the smell of his hair, the texture of his skin, and the sound of his voice.”

This pervasive fear of being forgotten illuminated a collective awareness among bereaved parents that death signals a permanent ending of the relationship not only in the physical sense but also in the emotional, psychological, and social aspects as well. The permanency of death evoked anxiety among bereaved parents, as the threat to the possibility of a meaningful existence arose from consciousness. From an existential perspective, there is an implicit belief that children will outlive their parents, establish themselves in society, and leave their mark on the world. Loss of children threatens this parental belief, forcing parents to abandon their hopes, dreams, and aspirations for their children and adopt the identity of bereaved parents. To allay these fears and keep the memory of their children alive, these parents have created unique and creative ways of remembering their children. These strategies served as symbolic mechanisms for preventing their children from becoming insignificant and nameless. These parents embarked on a quest for immortality to ensure that their children would live on forever. As “Laura” concluded, “Whatever mark we leave in life, eventually, we are going to be forgotten. That’s just the way life works.” For “Dana,” “Sarah,” “Mary Beth,” “Melissa,” and “Julia,” their participation in the present study was a method of achieving a sense of immortality by keeping the memory of their children alive, even after death.

### **Clinical Implications**

Findings from the present study have significant implications for clinical practice, counselor educators, and future research on suicide-bereaved parents. Results from the study suggest that suicide-bereaved parents are similar to other bereaved parents insofar as the nature and manifestation of continuing bonds expressions are present and emerge through symbolic rituals, physical objects, creative projects, sharing with others, and

discovering ways to honor and remember deceased children (Harper et al., 2011; Notwatzki & Kalischuk, 2009; Price et al., 2011). This study, however, adds to the body of knowledge on continuing bond expressions by looking beneath these attachment bonds to describe the meaning and experience of the parent-child attachment among suicide-bereaved parents. Parents in the study conveyed a universal desire to keep the memories of their deceased children alive through reminiscing about the life of their children, remembering special qualities about them, and sharing personal stories about their children with others. Remembering deceased children and keeping the positive memories alive helped parents strengthen the connection to their children, in turn, preserving their presence in the natural world.

Sanger (2008-2009) explored the role of continuing bond expressions on the process of mourning among bereaved persons in therapy. Through semi-structured interviews with 21 social workers on personal beliefs and willingness to discuss continuing bonds expressions, Sanger discovered that clients expressed a desire to talk about their attachment relationship with their deceased loved ones. Furthermore, bereaved persons introduced these continuing bonds into therapy to (a) receive reassurance that they were not *crazy*, (b) have their experience validated, and (c) to share and explore their personal experience with others. The latter of these motivations is consistent with the present findings as reflected in parental desires to share their children with the world and explore their attachment relationship in a structured way.

In light of Sanger's (2008-2009) conclusion that bereaved persons want to talk about their continuing bonds with their deceased loved ones, research suggests that bereavement counselors may not be adequately prepared to discuss these issues (Ober,

Granello, & Wheaton, 2012; Taylor, 2005). Taylor (2005) explored bereaved clients' perception of the therapeutic experience in terms of content and process when discussing continuing bonds with the deceased. He found that an overwhelming majority of participants were dissatisfied with their counseling experience. Participants reported feeling abnormal, unaccepted, misunderstood, and unable to connect with their counselors (Taylor, 2005). This unsatisfactory experience in counseling may be compounded for suicide survivors given the social stigma associated with this mode of death. Therefore, it would be advantageous for helping professionals to express appreciation of bereaved persons' experiences and be willing to explore the post-loss attachment and the meaning of such a relationship. Advanced training for counselors in grief and bereavement may be necessary to develop the skills and competencies to work effectively with this population (Ober et al., 2012). These researchers posited that personal experience with death and the completion of a graduate course on grief and bereavement is insufficient for developing the professional awareness, skills, and knowledge base to provide ethical and competent care to bereaved persons.

Given the profound nature of child death and the stigmatism of suicide, practitioners in the helping profession need to be knowledgeable about child death from suicide, family and individual coping styles, grief and bereavement across the life span, assessment and treatment of suicide-bereaved parents, and current research in the field that addresses therapeutic interventions, postvention programs, and community initiatives to reduce the social stigma of suicide. Helping professionals need to be sensitive to parental needs to talk about their attachment relationships with their deceased children, how it has changed over time, challenges to pursuing such a relationship, and their

personal experience of forming and maintaining post-death connections. This process can be facilitated by creating a safe, warm, and trusting atmosphere for bereaved parents to explore their thoughts and fears about their children being forgotten. Research indicates that bereaved parents want to discuss their lost loved one with others (Baddeley & Singer, 2009; Sanger, 2008-2009; Toller, 2005, 2008) and benefit from participation in research studies exploring the nature of the post-death parent-child relationship (Begley & Quayle, 2007; Hynson et al., 2006; Meert et al., 2008). These research findings are consistent with participants' reports in the present study that reflected appreciation and gratitude for being part of a research study. The present study provided bereaved parents with the opportunity to explore and develop a deeper understanding of their attachment relationships with their children. Participation in the study ensured bereaved parents that their bereavement narratives would be heard and that their children would live on forever.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results from the present study. These limitations relate directly to sample characteristics and have a significant impact on the application and relevance of the research findings to similar and other populations. First, the sample consisted of 10 bereaved parents that lost adolescent children aged 10-21 years old to suicide. Because this study focused exclusively on suicide-bereaved parents of adolescents the findings may not be applicable to bereaved parents that lost adolescent children to natural causes, accidents, terminal illness, or other non-suicide related deaths. Moreover, the research findings may not be relevant to suicide-bereaved parents that lost adult children. While increasing the sample size could strengthen the study, the researcher followed the qualitative principle of

saturation (Creswell, 2007). Although some researchers may consider this sample size to be relatively small, phenomenological studies have typically used 10 or fewer participants to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon (Begley & Quayle, 2007; O’Callaghan et al., 2013; Thrift & Coyle, 2005).

Although not intentional, participants in the study included only bereaved mothers. No bereaved fathers elected to participate in the current study. Consequently, the conclusions drawn from the present study may have limited relevance to bereaved fathers’ experiences with connections with their deceased children. The inclusion of bereaved fathers would offer a deeper and richer understanding of the parent-child attachment after adolescent suicide. Similarly, the narratives shared by bereaved parents of adolescent children may be qualitatively different from those parents who lost adult children to suicide. This limitation should be considered, given the natural evolution of the parent-child attachment over time and how the lives of children change between adolescence and adulthood.

A third limitation of the study is related to the cultural and geographic location of participants. All participants were recruited from support groups located in two southern states. These parents reported that they either had active or recent memberships in a particular support group. Therefore, as group members, it is expected that these parents may have felt more comfortable disclosing their personal experiences of loss and the attachment relationship shared with their deceased children. Consequently, the inclusion of bereaved parents who were not affiliated with a support group may have yielded different findings from the findings presented here. The sample was culturally and ethnically limited and consisted primarily of Caucasian participants ( $n = 8$ ), and there was

one Native American and one Asian American who participated in the study. The inclusion of ethnically diverse participants offered a new perspective and richness to the research findings.

A fourth limitation of the study pertained to the time frame of participants' recruitment. Given the nature of the study, participants had only 3 months to enroll in the study, so recruitment of prospective participants was limited. Thus, it would seem plausible that expanding the recruitment period to 6 months or even longer would increase the chances of enrolling participants from other ethnic backgrounds, bereaved fathers, and those suicide-bereaved parents not affiliated with any support group.

Interviews were used as the primary method of data collection in the study. These interviews were open-ended in structure and format, providing bereaved parents the opportunity to explore, discuss, and reflect upon their attachment relationship with their children. The researcher used reflexivity, journaling, and the epoche process to refrain from the natural attitude toward continuing bonds, parental grief, and adolescent suicide in order to adopt a phenomenological attitude. While interviews are considered scientific tools for investigating the subjective experience of a phenomenon, these instruments rely on self-reported retrospective data. As such, it is possible that participants in the study may have forgotten certain details of their experience given the duration of time since their child's death and the interview. To confirm the research findings, all participants were offered the opportunity for a second interview, and all ten parents declined. Participants were mailed a summary of the study's findings, and 5 participants confirmed the findings.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of ten bereaved parents who established and maintained connections to their adolescent children following their suicides. Results from the present study indicated that suicide-bereaved parents do, in fact, maintain connections to their deceased children. These connections emerged as conscious experiences for bereaved parents in a number of ways, including dreams, memories and recollections, belongings of the deceased, photographs, sensing the presence of the deceased, after death communication, and hearing, smelling, or seeing visions of the deceased. The most prominent of these connections manifested through the active process of reflecting on and remembering certain qualities or aspects of their lives, conversations, interactions, stories, and positive memories. The active pursuit of keeping their children's memory alive served not only as a connection for these parents but a way to integrate them into the world.

The significance of the present study can be found in the descriptions provided by bereaved parents of their lived experience in forming and maintaining connections to their deceased children. The essence within these cognitive, emotional, and spiritual connections reflects the persistent fear shared by bereaved parents that their children will one day be forgotten. To address this fear, bereaved parents engaged in symbolic behaviors that represented their beloved children. By participating in these symbolic behaviors, bereaved parents were able to honor, remember, and include their children as part of their life narratives.

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## APPENDIX A. LETTERS TO GATEKEEPERS

Date  
Research Site's official name  
Research Site Name  
Research Site Address

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As a graduate learner at Capella University, I am requesting permission to conduct my dissertation research study titled "Surviving suicide: Understanding the lived experiences of bereaved parents" under the direction of my mentor, Dr. Michael Loos, at a safe, comfortable, and confidential setting such as the local library or community center.

The purpose of the study is to determine how bereaved parents experience grief and bereavement following the suicide death of a child between the ages of 10 and 21 years old. Further, this study will explore how bereaved parents establish and maintain a connection or relationship with their deceased child. The primary activity will be an in-depth, open-ended interview with bereaved parents lasting approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour with the possibility of a follow-up interview. I request your assistance in recruiting bereaved parents at your agency/bereavement support group. I expect that this project will end no later than August 31, 2012.

I will provide a copy of all Capella University IRB-approved, consent documents before I begin the research. Any data collected will be kept confidential and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my office. I will also provide a copy of the aggregate results from this study upon your request.

If you have any concerns about this request please contact me at the phone number listed below.

Sincerely,

Jeremy H. Broussard  
Address1.  
Address2.  
(225) xxx-xxxx

APPENDIX B. BEREAVEMENT STUDY FLIER

# Bereavement Study

Surviving Suicide: Understanding the lived experiences of bereaved parents.

Researcher in the Counseling program at Capella University is conducting a study to learn about the bereavement experience of parents who lose a child to suicide and how bereaved parents establish and maintain a connection or relationship with their deceased child. The researcher is requesting participation from those bereaved parents who have lost a child aged 10 to 21 years old to suicide no less than 1 year ago.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to meet with the researcher for an in-depth, open-ended interview to learn more about your bereavement experience of losing a child to suicide and your present relationship with your deceased child. Interviews will be held in a safe, comfortable, and confidential setting and are expected to last from 45 minutes to 1 hour.

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information please call Jeremy H. Broussard at (225) xxx-xxxx. There is absolutely no obligation to participate if you call, and all parents are free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx	Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx
Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx	Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx
Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx	Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx
Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx	Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx
Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx	Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx
Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx	Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx
Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx	Bereavement Study (225) xxx-xxxx

## APPENDIX C. BRIEF TELEPHONE QUESTIONNAIRE

When prospective parents contact the researcher, after having read the flier posted at one of the approved research sites, he will use the following recruitment script:

“Thank you for contacting me regarding the flier you read about my dissertation study titled, “Surviving suicide: Understanding the lived experiences of bereaved parents.” Before I invite you to participate in this study, I must gather some general demographic information from you. The purpose of these questions is to ensure that I will be able to use any information that you may provide.

1. Are you the mother or father of a child, between the ages of 10 and 21, who has died from suicide?  
 YES     NO
2. Has it been at least 1 year since the suicide death of your child?  
 YES     NO
3. Have you recently or are currently being treated for any major physical and/or emotional changes since the death of your child?  
 YES     NO
4. If the answer to question #3 is YES, are you comfortable sharing the details of your bereavement and the relationship you now have with your child?  
 YES     NO
5. Do you have a current relationship or connection to your deceased child?  
 YES     NO
6. Would you help me understand this relationship by participating in an in-depth, confidential interview?  
 YES     NO
7. If, during the course of the interview, there are words or references used to describe the relationship or connection to your deceased child, would you be willing to elaborate on these words and provide concrete examples?  
 YES     NO

**For those eligible participants:** “Given your responses, I would like to invite you to participate in my study. Before we schedule an interview, I would like to mail you a recruitment packet that contains important information about my study. When you receive this recruitment packet, please review the information in its entirety, sign the informed consent document, and return to me using the enclosed stamped envelope. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the material found in the recruitment packet, please contact me. Once I receive this packet from you, I will contact you to schedule a confidential interview at either a private room at the local library or community center in your parish.” The researcher will then collect the parents contact information, including telephone number and mailing address.

**For those ineligible participants:** “I appreciate the time that you have given me today and honesty in answering my questions. However, given your responses to questions, it would not be appropriate for you to participate in the research study. If any of these questions have produced psychological discomfort or distress, I am willing to provide you with information on professional counseling services that are available in your community. Again, thank you for your time.”

Questionnaire designed by Broussard, 2013

**APPENDIX D. BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Before I invite you to participate in this study, I must gather some general demographic information from you.

**Parent's Information**  
**Information**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity (Circle all that apply):  
apply):

- a) African American
- b) Caucasian
- c) Asian
- d) Hispanic
- e) Other \_\_\_\_\_

Education Level: \_\_\_\_\_  
death: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status:

Attempts: \_\_\_\_\_

- a) Single
- b) Married
- c) Divorced
- d) Separated
- e) Widowed
- f) Partnership
- g) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

If married or in a partnership, how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

If divorced or separated, how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

If widowed, how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

If applicable:

Surviving Children:

- a) Number: \_\_\_\_\_
- b) Age(s): \_\_\_\_\_
- c) Gender(s): \_\_\_\_\_
- d) Do any of these children currently reside with you? If so, please indicate the number, age, and gender of those children living with you.
  - i. How many? \_\_\_\_\_

**Deceased Child's**

Age of child at death:

Gender:

Ethnicity (Circle all that

- a) African American
- b) Caucasian
- c) Asian
- d) Hispanic
- e) Other \_\_\_\_\_

Time since

Number of Suicide

- ii. Ages? \_\_\_\_\_
- iii. Genders? \_\_\_\_\_

If you have experienced prior deaths of other children, please indicate: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years married: \_\_\_\_\_

Surviving Children: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Are you the mother or father of a child, between the ages of 10 and 21, who has died from suicide?  
 YES       NO
2. Has it been at least 1 year since the suicide death of your child?  
 YES       NO
3. Have you recently or are currently being treated for any major physical and/or emotional changes since the death of your child?  
 YES       NO
4. If the answer to question #3 is YES, are you comfortable sharing the details of your bereavement and the relationship you now have with your child?  
 YES       NO
5. Do you have a current relationship or connection to your deceased child?  
 YES       NO
6. Would you help me understand this relationship by participating in an in-depth, confidential interview?  
 YES       NO
7. If, during the course of the interview, there are words or references used to describe the relationship or connection to your deceased child, would you be willing to elaborate on these words and provide concrete examples?  
 YES       NO

If any of these questions have produced psychological discomfort or distress, I am willing to provide you with information on professional counseling services that are available in your community. Again, thank you for your time.

Questionnaire designed by Broussard, 2013

## APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I. Explain to the participant the research questions:

“What are the lived experiences of parents who lose children to suicide?”

II. Opening statement:

- “Would you kindly tell me of your current relationship with your child, and how this experience of having a connection to your child has affected you? You can tell your story in any way you feel comfortable, perhaps beginning with telling me a bit about your relationship with your child before his or her death and how this relationship has changed over time.”

The following interview guide has been subjected to field testing and will be used:

- (1) Describe how you have established and maintained a relationship or connection to your child following his or her suicide.
- (2) What feelings and thoughts do you associate with your relationship to your child?
- (3) When you think about the nature of your present relationship with your child, what stands out the most for you?
- (4) What meaning does this relationship or connection to your child have for you?
- (5) What difficulties or challenges have you experienced in establishing and maintaining a connection or relationship with your child?
- (6) How has your present relationship with your child affected your grief?
  - a. Has and, if so, how has this connection or relationship to your child changed your thoughts and/or attitude toward life and death?
- (7) Are there any final thoughts or suggestions that you would like to share that might help other parents bereaved from the suicide of their child as well as those who want to help or comfort them?

Prompts:

1. “Tell me what happened next?”
2. “What does that mean to you?”
3. “Could you describe this experience in more detail?”

## APPENDIX F. VERBAL SCRIPT FOR SCHEDULING INTERVIEW

Once the completed research packets are received from participants, the researcher will contact parents directly by phone to schedule an appropriate interview time. The following script will be used to complete this task.

1. “Hello, [parent’s name]. This is Jeremy H. Broussard. I wanted to let you know that I received your recruitment packet. Thank you for completing this and mailing it back to me. Do you have any questions about my study or the information in the packet?”
2. The researcher will answer any question or concern expressed by the parent.
3. “If not, then I would like to schedule a private interview with you. Please keep in mind that the interview may last between 45 minutes and 1 hour.”
4. If the parent agrees, then the researcher and parent will schedule an interview at an agreeable time and place.

## **APPENDIX G. INTERVIEW PROCEDURES**

Interviews will be conducted in a private and confidential setting at either the local library or community center, depending on the preference of the participant. At each interview, the following procedures will be followed:

1. The researcher will review the informed consent document with the participant and ask the parent to re-sign the informed consent.
2. The recording device will be turned on.
3. The researcher will review the research questions with the participant.
4. The opening statement outlined in Appendix F will be stated.
5. As needed, the researcher will use the prompts listed in Appendix F to deepen the exploration into the phenomenon being investigated.
6. The interview guide listed in Appendix F will be asked to further the discussion on bereaved parent's relationship with their deceased child.
7. The recording device will be turned off at the end of the interview