



University of Utah

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL

**YOUNG ADULTS, THE IMPACT AND EXPERIENCE OF COMMEMORATIVE
PRACTICES**

**Lynette Randall (Mark de St. Aubin)
Department of College of Social Work**

ABSTRACT

This study uses qualitative methodology to investigate the self-reported impact commemorative practices have on bereaved young adults. The act of commemoration is defined in the literature review with special emphasis on traditional and non-traditional methods. The difference between traditional and non-traditional as well as intentional and unintentional practices are highlighted with the research and subsequent data collection. Data has been acquired from a convenient sampling of young adults between the ages of 18-35 who have experienced a loss in the last 10 years. Data was collected via individual interviews following a question guide in which both the experience and impact of said commemorative practices was studied. There is value in examining the different ways young adults participate in commemorative practices. This understanding can hopefully emphasize the importance of diverse commemorative networks and practices which can help aid within the field of grief counseling. The results of this study highlight the influence of traditional and non-traditional commemorative practices within bereaved young adults. The definition of traditional is contextual and based on the reporter, but is likewise compared to other traditional and non-traditional practices that will also be examined. This study will also consider the effect said commemorative practices have on daily activities in the lives of the reporters as well as their relationships. Additionally, quotes from the grief interviews are utilized throughout the results section in a unique narrative format as a way to both honor the grief shared throughout this study and to better illustrate the impact of these commemorative practices. Coding and thematic analysis were used to analyze the results. It is hopeful that the results of this research

could aid the clinical grieving process by demonstrating the importance of diverse commemorative networks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
METHODS	6
RESULTS	9
DISCUSSION	19
REFERENCES	22

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Bereavement is “a condition that is endemic to being human” (Balk, 2011, prelude). Experiencing and subsequently mourning or grieving the loss of a loved one can be an overwhelming and powerful experience. Grief looks differently for each individual and is accompanied by a unique set of symptoms (Hoy, 2013). “We grieve because we are attached to someone who has been taken irreparably from us” (Balk, 2011, pg. 41). Many do not know where to begin to talk about their loss, grief and trauma responses. Psychotherapist Pamela Malone says, “this stems from growing up in a death-denying society where grief and death are rarely discussed in either the home or the community, although they are a very real part of life” (Malone, 2016, pg. 75). This “death-denying” society hinders the bereaved as they intentionally or unintentionally pursue their own form of healing (Malone, 2016).

An additional aspect of this “death-denying” society is how individuals often apply the concept of “normal grief” (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015, pg. 82). An unhealthy cultural expectation is prevalent among those who are bereaved of what grief should look like and how it should be handled. In a study conducted by Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum (2015), many bereaved reported being told or assumed an expectation that their grief had a timeline and moved in specific stages. However, in spite of this dominant discourse, they described their experience of grief as “dynamic, complicated, unpredictable, and ongoing” (Servaty-Seib, et al., 2015, pg. 81).

The complexity of grief is also reflected in the various commemorative practices bereaved persons utilize throughout their grieving process. Participation in commemorative practices is a personal response by mourners to individualized needs

embedded in their grief (Neimeyer, Harris & Winokuer & Thornton, 2011). Grief and commemoration responses are always unique to the needs of the self or the self in community with others (Servaty-Seib, et al., 2015).

Research shows that acts of commemoration are both helpful and important within the bereavement experience (Balk, 2011). Commemoration is a vital and personal act within the grieving process (Hoy, 2013). Commemoration can be defined as an intentional or unintentional ritual or activity the bereaved does to remember their loved one (Hoy, 2013). Commemoration can further be categorized within traditional and non-traditional methods (Servaty-Seib, et al., 2015). It is important to consider such distinctions and their impacts as the field of grief counseling is currently undergoing a critical examination (Walter, C. A., & McCoyd, J. L., 2016). Understanding the benefit and subsequent importance of diverse commemorative networks and practices can help aid the field of grief counseling (Walter, et al., 2016). “Bereavement rituals and legacy are inextricably linked concepts as often the use of rituals by mourners assist in the consolidation of the legacy of the one mourned” (Neimeyer, et al., 2011). Hoy also stated that commemoration “in the face of death can clearly be numbered among the important, adaptive activities in which bereaved families and communities participate” (2013).

Commemoration can take on a variety of forms. Within the standard traditional definition, commemoration is often viewed as funerals, grave visits and symbols tied back to the deceased (Hoy, 2013; Gross, 1992; Neimeyer, et al., 2011). In spite of the variation that can exist among funerals themselves, the traditional funeral procession is “a highly ritualized metaphor for [commemoration’s] transitional bridge” (Hoy, 2013, pg.10). Symbols or “observable objects referring to ideas or emotions outside the

symbols themselves” are also categorized under the section of traditional commemorative practices (Gross, 1992, pg. 70). These symbols can include photo collages, memorabilia display and video tributes; all of which assist in recasting the life of the deceased (Hoy, 2013). These symbols are utilized by mourners to “make sense of the deceased person’s life by recasting the events shared and the relationships enjoyed into a tribute” (Hoy, 2013, pg.91). Symbols encompass a diverse array of possibilities for mourners to connect and find meaning with their loss. Such connection can also enhance present relationships and experiences, both of which will be viewed later in this study (Walter, et al., 2016; Neimeyer, et al., 2011). It is important to note that what is traditional for a person in one culture may not be traditional for a person of another (Hoy, 2013).

Non-traditional commemorative practices could then be described as anything outside of these traditional common practices (Hoy, 2013). As has been expressed, grief and subsequent grief practices are dynamic and complex experiences for each individual. Literature shows a wide array of noted commemoration rituals and activities that all fall within a non-traditional category (Hoy, 2013; Walter, et al., 2016). However, there is less concrete research on strictly non-traditional bereavement practices as traditional and non-traditional are rarely separated for research purposes and often share intersectionalities.

A commonality shared between both traditional and non-traditional categories is that of shared space (Cobb, 1976; Hoy, 2013, Servaty-Seib, et al., 2015). Support from others who are grieving is important for many griever and the need to “gather with caring others is intrinsic” to the grieving process (Servaty-Seib, et al., 2015; Hoy, 2013, pg. 61). Honoring the life of the deceased in community format facilitates connection among grieving people to each other and provides support to co-mourners (Hoy, 2013).

This social support is vital as it “leads an individual to believe that they are cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belong to a larger network involving communication and mutual obligation” (Cobb, 1976, pg. 300).

While grief obviously affects persons of all ages, this study focuses specifically on the impact and experience of grief and commemorative practices within young adults. In *Grief and loss across the lifespan: A biopsychosocial perspective*, Walter and McCoyd highlight the unique experience grief can have on emerging and young adults (Walter, et al., 2016). Young adults are in an impressionable time between adolescence and adulthood and the loss of a loved one can be traumatic and jarring (Servaty-Seib, et al., 2015). A significant percentage of young adults experience bereavement (Balk, 2011). For example, research has shown “between 22% and 30% of college students are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or a friend” (Balk, 2011). Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum’s research studied college students exclusively, featuring the diverse networks the bereaved reported in their grief process as well as the wide array of their commemorative practices (2015). Additionally, Water and McCoyd highlight the importance of programs that facilitate grieving especially for young adults as constructive steps towards being present and processing their grief (Walter, et al., 2016). This study aims to prove that non-traditional means of commemoration are just as effective, if not more beneficial, than traditional commemoration.

Personal Narrative

The beginnings of this research and subsequent thesis originate from the devastating loss of the author’s mother. Parental loss at any age is a specific form of

bereavement, however, parental loss within young or emerging adulthood is particularly unique (Servaty-Seib, Fajgenbaum, 2015).

I began this project as a way to understand my own loss-- to identify what I do specifically to commemorate the memory of my mother and what I have found that affect (if any) to be. Curiosity peaked as I contemplated the commemorative practices of my similarly bereaved peers. I wondered what they did to remember their loved one and how they felt that impacted them, specifically their continued relationships and their day-to-day life and perspectives. I choose these categories of self-reported impact to examine simply because it is where I have experienced the largest shift within my own grief. As mere curiosity transitioned into genuine contemplation and inquisition, I sculpted the framework of an independent research project highlighting a specific population (18-35 years old) with inclusion criteria of having experienced a loss in the past 10 years. I highlighted the context of both relationship and time since loss of loved one, as well as age of the bereaved upon time of death. I speculated differences in commemoration based on length of time and age as well as types of commemoration (i.e. self-defined traditional vs. non-traditional, and intentional vs. unintentional). I examined 22 young adults over the course of three months, all of whom had experienced the loss of a loved one. These losses included parents, siblings, grandparents and friends. While conducting “grief interviews,” I acquired data regarding their personal commemoration practices and the subsequent self-reported impacts.

The entire process was beautifully insightful and incredibly genuine. I was honored to share vulnerable space with these young adults as they bravely recounted their loss and allowed me to take an inner look into their rituals.

METHODS

Participants

The participants within this study were selected via convenience sampling. They feature bereaved young adults between the ages of 18-35 who have lost a loved one within the last 10 years. Participants do not include anyone unable to give consent, nor those who are incarcerated or pregnant. Recruitment took place within the University of Utah chapter of “Actively Moving Forward,” a bereavement support group for college students and young adults. This recruitment was simply an extended invitation in person within these settings. Recruitment also involved reaching out in person to other individuals known by “Actively Moving Forward” participants who have also experienced a loss.

Instruments

The influences of traditional vs. non-traditional commemorative practices were self-reported by this convenient sampling of young adults who experienced a loss in the last ten years. The data collection took the form of individual interviews responding to a question guide. These interviews utilized open-ended questions to facilitate a conversation to collect qualitative data. The data collected provided evidence regarding how traditional and non-traditional methods of commemoration are experienced by the bereaved, as well as how they were impacted by said methods.

Procedure

Following recruitment, individual interviews were scheduled with each participant. These interviews took place at a location most convenient for the participant (usually on the University of Utah campus). The interviews were recorded and followed

the question guide (Appendix A). All responses were captured into a password protected online platform (google drive) and were later transcribed by the primary investigator. Following the completion of the questions, a short “check-in” was facilitated by the primary investigator. This check-in, a simple question of “how are you?” followed a potentially triggering or emotional conversation. If needed, the participant was then directed to additional resources (counseling, self-care suggestions, etc.) by the primary investigator. The individual interview process took no longer than 30 minutes.

The entirety of this research study was conducted under the supervision and approval of the University of Utah’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). This included confidentiality requirements as well as an IRB approved consent letter (Appendix B). Safety of participants in this research study as well as subsequent data integrity was a high priority. Outreach and later individual interviews took place in a safe environment and check-ins also took place post-interview to assess emotional well-being/safety of participant. Discussing bereavement and grief could have involved triggers for a participant and a closing emotional check-in helped said participant identify or process further steps needed to stabilize emotional safety. These factors were specifically pointed out during the consent process, via the consent letter.

Data integrity was implemented via storing all transcribed interviews on a password protected online site (google drive) and omitting participants name and other identifying information from their answers. Upon completion of study, data will be subsequently deleted. The resources available to conduct this research included a close mentor and faculty advisor within the College of Social Work at the University of Utah who specializes in grief & loss counseling, as well as additional research mentors. The

space the research took place in varied depending on individual interviews, as there was no set aside place for these to occur. Additionally, equipment (i.e. laptop and recording device) was owned by the researcher. Confidentiality of the study data mirrored the measures taken to ensure data integrity. Data integrity was implemented via storing all transcribed interviews on password-protected online site (google drive) and by omitting participants name and other identifying information from their answers. Additionally, the principal investigator complied with the confidentiality requirements of gathered data as required by the IRB.

Data Analysis Method

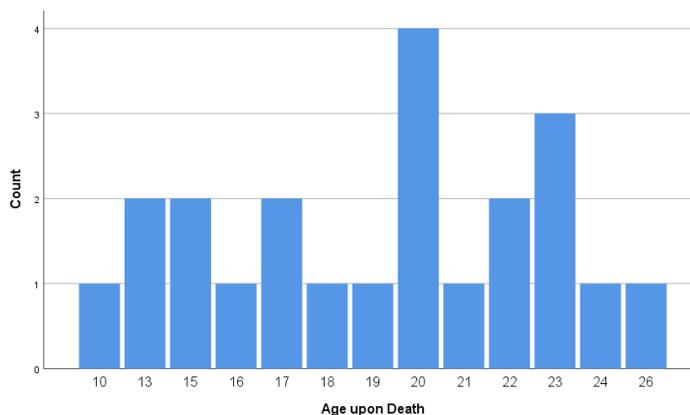
Interviews were analyzed using theme analysis (Dudley, 2011, pg. 258). Theme analysis was developed specifically for interview-formed methodology, with the goal of identifying common themes or patterns that are prevalent in several cases. This approach was chosen given the open-ended and personal nature of the expected answers regarding commemorative practices. In order to understand how these practices are experienced and their subsequent influence, theme analysis will be utilized to identify common themes reported in the answers. These responses were grouped together by a theme and a clearly articulated name was labeled for each theme. This method of coding or labeling enabled a succinct overview for the array of experience and impact within commemorative practices. Consistent with recommendations for this approach, this analysis process took place upon completion of data collection. Interviews were transcribed and coded after the primary investigator become thoroughly acquainted with the entire narrative. Themes were then identified and subsequently coded. Qualitative data saturation can be achieved via a relatively low sample size. Data saturation is a term used in qualitative data methods

to describe data saturation, meaning enough data has been collected to identify themes as well as no new data emerging (Dudley, 2011). The sample size within this study was 22 participants.

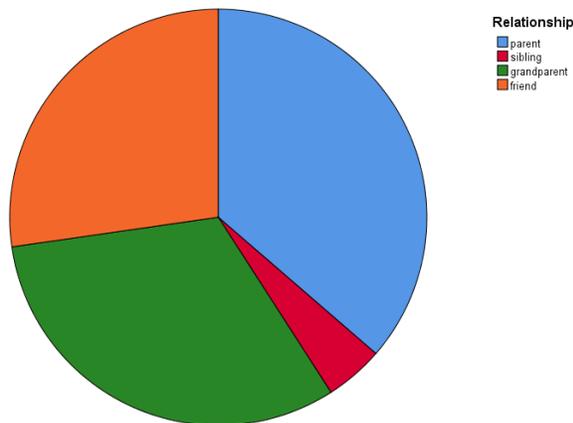
RESULTS

Sample Description

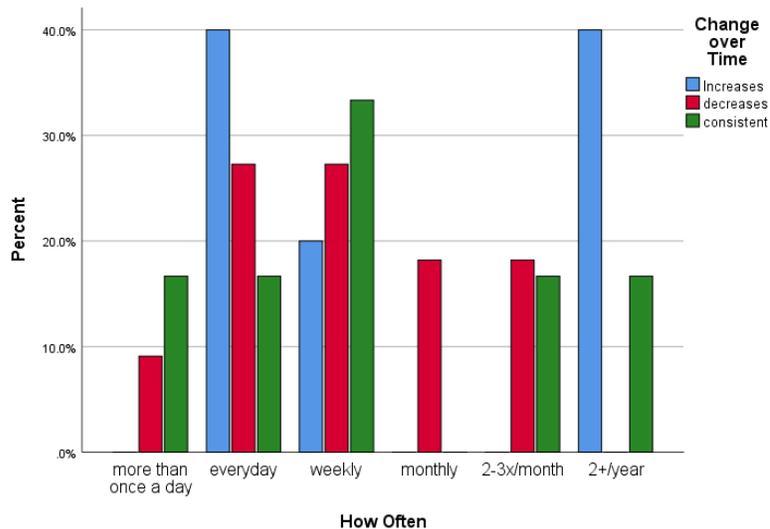
Of the 22 interviews that were conducted, the mean age a participant experienced a loss was 22 years old, with a range between 10-26 years old. The mean length of time since the passing of the loved one was 5 years, with a range between 1-10 years. Based on the evidence reported herein, the majority of relationships reported were between children and their parents (36.4%, n=8), followed closely by grandparents (31.8%, n=7), friends (27.3%, n=6) and siblings (4.5%, n=1).



Above is a graph depicting the range in age at time of death for the loved one of the participants. The graph below depicts the categories of reported relationships with the deceased.



According to the findings, there was no direct correlation between time passed since death and frequency of engagement in commemorative practices the participant engaged in. Some participants reported an increase in frequency of engagement in commemorative activities the longer it had been since the passing of their loved one, while some reported a decrease, and others reported a consistent amount entirely.



One participant described the increase in her commemoration as time since the death of her father increased:

- “From the beginning, I didn’t listen too much. I was grieving. But after I had a grasp on the memories, I would listen to the song every day and then to every other day and now a couple times a day.”

Commemoration

Within the reported findings a wide array of diverse commemorative practices was reported. Before delving into the categories of traditional and non-traditional as well as the self-reported impact, a comprehensive list of the various commemorations will be provided. Some participants reported multiple commemoration activities.

Commemorative Practices

wake book
 snowboarding
 collegiate athletics
 visiting gravesite
 hiked the AT
 kayaking
 walking on beaches
 listen to grandfather's record player
 go to her grave
 drive past her home,
 play the piano
 Beyoncé song
 Instagram meme
 camping
 hexagon tattoo
 ash spreading
 photo album
 necklace made from his belongings
 celebrate his birthday
 playing basketball,
 listen to Journey,
 eating tacos
 going into her room
 praying
 internal conversations with him
 imagine what he would be like now
 mimic her clothing style
 re-read birthday cards she wrote me
 snuggle in the quilt she made me
 picking wildflowers
 going to the desert with our group of
 friends
 birdwatching

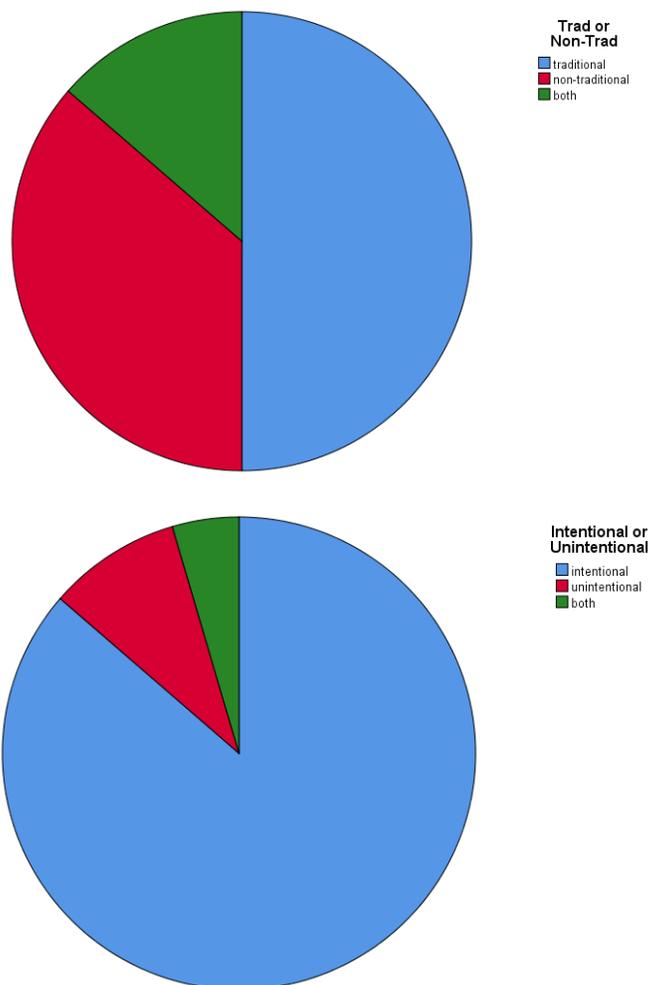
hear her voice in my head throughout the
 day
 teddy bear made from his shirts
 necklaces worn at funeral,
 sharing stories
 dinner with his parents once a month
 similar tattoo
 going to his favorite spot
 fixing up his dollhouse
 wear his clothing
 conversations with family
 influencing my wedding planning
 physically be in places he has been to
 talk to him out loud while driving
 visit her house,
 celebrate her birthday
 listen to her song,
 go to her favorite restaurant
 order her normal order,
 talk in her native language

Below are a few explanations behind these practices from the participants:

- “Being outside every day is his memory living on through me.”
- “He and I had a dream that we would both be playing sports at a collegiate level. I’ve done my best to reach the standard and play at a collegiate level.”
- “My dad was cremated, I would bring a little bit of his ashes and spread them where I loved. It was special to take him with me to places where I found meaningful and leave him.”
- “Playing the piano is an ode to my grandmother as she encouraged me to play my whole life.”
- “I grew up playing basketball with my dad. I’m not super athletic now, but I still keep my toes in basketball because my dad liked him so much.”
- “I dig through my thoughts and memories and I am drawn back to certain memories that are really meaningful to me. Or I’ll be reminded of cool characteristics of him.”
- “I always think about how good of friends we could have been.”
- I hear her voice throughout the day, little sentence long lessons that I remember for some reason... they work their way into my head. It is just a part of who I am.”

Of the 22 interviews that were conducted, participants reported on a number of traditional commemorative practices, ranging from going to a place of connection, doing an activity, celebrating a certain event or holiday. A majority of participants, (50%, n=11) commemorated the loss through traditional practices. 36.4% (n=8) reported non-traditional practices, while 13.6% (n=3) reported both traditional and non-traditional. Additionally, a majority of participants (86.4%, n=19) reported that their commemoration was intentional, while 9.1% (n=2) reported unintentional commemoration, and 4.5% (n=1) reported doing both.

The graphs below portray both the reported traditional vs. non-traditional and intentional vs. unintentional reporting in commemorative practices.



When asked why they self-defined their commemorative practices as traditional, participants listed a number of explanations:

- “I visit their graves and where they last were. It makes me feel like I am a little bit closer to them.”
- “This is traditional because I’ll do this with my kids someday.
- “I am doing things he loved.”
- “On her birthday I pick wild flowers and put them in a jar as I did as a kid for her.”

Additionally, “tradition” emerged when participants felt they were complying with a traditional practice of grief processing:

- “There are definitely times when I felt like I should be sad or be happy and I couldn’t get ahold of myself...I envision that to be pretty traditional in the grieving process.”

Consequently, when asked why they self-defined their commemoration as non-traditional, participants listed a number of explanations, one of which being the lack of a set routine or ritual such as commemorating on a certain day or time:

- “I would want them to be traditional, I struggle with anniversaries. I would enjoy some sort of tradition. I initially wanted to right after he passed away, but it became more challenging as time from his death increased.”
- “I wouldn’t say that I have frequent rituals that I do, but I more often do things sporadically with him in mind and in his memory.”
- “I do these things whenever I feel I need my mom... not at a set time.”

Others related their non-traditionalism to the uniqueness of their commemorative practices in relation to their perception of societal norms:

- “His grave is a tree in the desert instead of a grave in a cemetery.”
- “I don’t think most people get to partake in this kind of ceremony where all of his friends got to participate in spreading his ashes. I feel very lucky to have done that. It was a huge part in my healing process.”
- “When he passed away initially, I spent a lot of time trying to do things that I thought would make him really proud, but now it has developed into doing what I love.”

And other participants spoke to the authenticity the claimed non-traditional commemoration provided:

- “I don’t think it is traditional because it is much more personal than any traditions.”

Impact

Of the 22 interviews that were conducted, participants reported on various impacts commemorative practices have had on their relationships, ranging from strengthening to weakening. The majority of participants (72.8%, n=16) reported positive impacts such as helping them feel closer to their significant other, family, friends, or helping them to prioritize and be more open and accepting. 22.7% (n=5) reported negative impact of their commemorative practices resulting in straining current or past relationships. And 4.5% (n=1) reported no impact upon their current or past relationships.

Many participants referenced the impact it has had on their relationships with their significant other:

- “If it is somebody I really want to bring into my life, they need to know this part about me.”
- “I have a fiancé and he didn’t get to meet my mom, but he can tell that she was a good person through me because of the way she raised me. That brings us closer together.”
- “When he first passed, I was dating somebody and he was not supportive at all and that is what helped end that relationship. It helped identify a red flag for me in that relationship.”
- “It makes me look for someone like my dad to marry. Puts a new perspective and emphasis on meeting the standard of my dad and I try share him with whomever I am with so they can understand that part of me.”

Other participants referenced the impact commemorative practices have had on their relationships with family members:

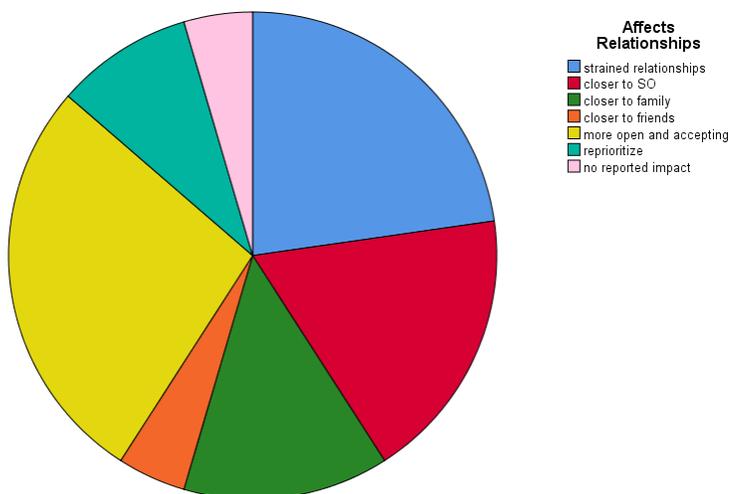
- “I am closer with my immediate family because it something that all of us are experiencing. We all mourn differently, but we are so connected so we understand and empathize a little better.”
- “Her influence has helped me to have a better relationship with my brother and sister.”

And other participants referenced the overall mentality shift which their commemorative practices have helped to facilitate, affecting all of their relationships:

- “I take the time and energy to spend those moments with those you love. My perspective has totally changed.”
- “When I do remember my mom, it helps me want to be more like her.”
- “It has helped me to see people for who they really are and what they could become. He saw me for the person that I was going to become and helped me in that way.”

Negative impact was also experienced by participants including:

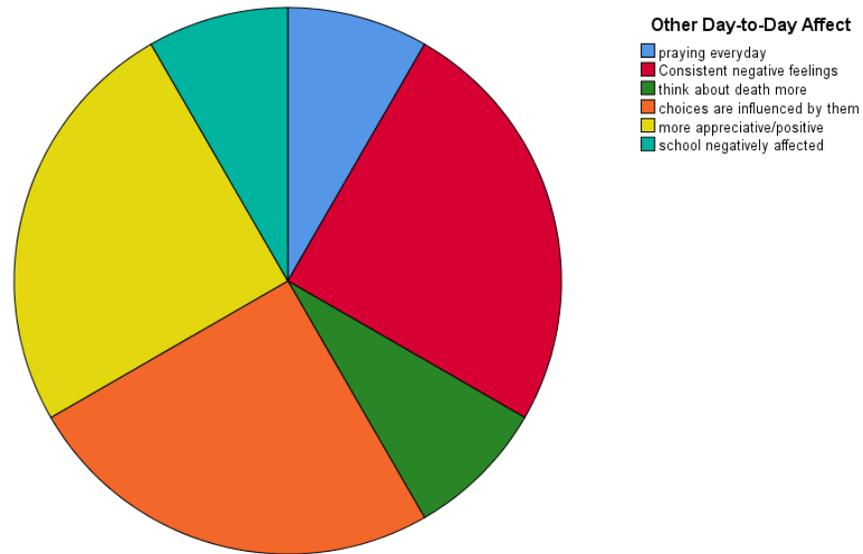
- “I was not letting myself use my family as a resource and it put quite the strain on our relationship.”
- “I find it healing when I do commemorate... If I dwell too much on it, it can be hard on my relationships, even with my stepmom and with my husband. “
- “Makes me more private sometimes. I feel awkward that they don’t know this big part of me and I don’t know how to communicate that sometimes.”



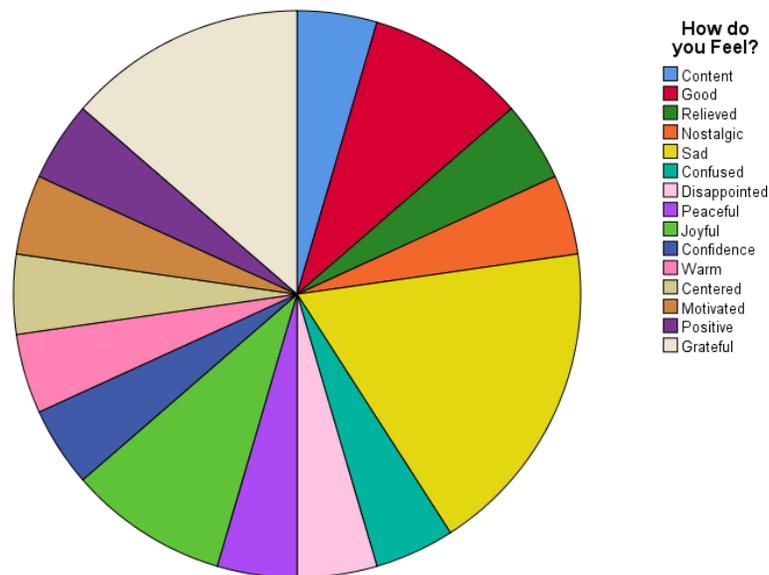
Of the 22 interviews that were conducted, participants reported on various impacts commemorative practices have had on their day-to-day experiences and/or functioning. 45.5% (n=10) reported no impact on their day-to-day functioning as a result of commemorating and 54.5% (n=12) reported impact on their day to day activities. Interestingly, within this impact, 33.3% (n=4) reported negative impact such as difficulties in school and consistent negative feelings, while 66.7% (n=8) reported positive impacts such as an increase in positivity and appreciation, as well as strengthened spirituality.

Additional narrative on the impact includes:

- “It is a gamble when I wake up, is this going to be a draining day or a good day?”
- “I almost dropped out of grad school. I have had a very difficult time focusing.”
- “I started antidepressants for the first time in my life. And that took a lot to process.”
- “Makes me jealous of others who have their parents.”
- “Helps me reframe a bad day into a good day... It has been healing for me.”
- “Her lessons impact me every day. I mean, how important to you consider a parent’s lessons after they are gone?”
- “Fairly often I try to self-evaluate to see if my decisions would make him proud or not. He still has a pretty big influence on what I do.”

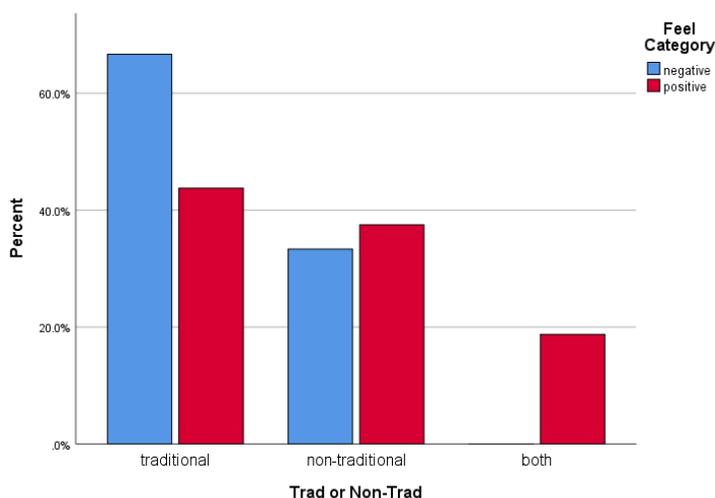


The final component of the grief interviews assessed overall self-reported mood of the participants following commemoration. The overwhelming majority of participants reported positive affect post-commemoration with 72.7% (n=16), while 27.3% (n=6) reported negative. The specific moods described are listed in the pie chart below.



Furthermore, there was higher reporting for positive emotions following participants' use of non-traditional commemorative practices vs. traditional commemorative practices. In contrast, there was higher reporting for negative feelings following traditional commemoration rather than

non-traditional. However, when engaging in both types of commemoration, positive feelings were unanimously experienced.



Below are narrative reports from participants when prompted to describe what they feel following a commemorative act:

- “It is just weird to have that person gone. I’m figuring out what works best for me still. It feels good to remember.”
- “I feel like I am respecting what he did, respecting my family name and my heritage and connections I have with my family.”
- “There are times when it is more painful, there are moments I would want to share with him. It just feels good that he is still a part of my life.”
- “I am more motivated by thinking about people who have passed on and be more involved and engaged in honor of them.”
- “I feel motivated to stay positive. And have goals to be a cool mom like her someday.”
- “It has caused me to question my beliefs and want to believe in a form of an afterlife.”
- “There is a sense of feeling very, very lucky that he was brought into my life. I do sometimes get upset, because I wish I would have had the rest of my life to learn and grow with him. That is upsetting for me. I just let those emotions in as they come. This is bigger than anything I’ve dealt with and I have actively tried to take it as it comes.”
- “It is daunting to realize that this is my new normal.”
- “The hardest thing for me to sit with was realizing that no one will ever occupy the space that he filled in my life.”
- “I feel confidence because I feel he approves of my choices.”

- “It is still kind of painful, but it is still warm and makes him feel closer. [Commemoration] is something that I am not afraid to do and look back on him now. It is not something that I dread or avoid. It happens randomly and when it does, I don’t get distraught over it anymore.”
- “He is a song that I’ve forgotten how it goes and then when I play it again, it is ‘Oh, that is how it goes!’ It is bright colors and hopeful, not necessarily happy. It is refreshing.”
- “That emptiness helps me realize how important she is to me.”
- “It has made me a person that understands loss.”
- “I am acutely reminded of her absence.”

DISCUSSION

Limitations

While there is a substantive amount of qualitative research derived from these grief interviews, there are many areas that could be bolstered by acquiring additional data. The sample size (n=22) was more than enough to reach saturation, however, additional data would have been helpful to acquire from the participants. Such additional data could include added demographics, i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, education, etc. Identification of additional demographic fields could have assisted in supporting a generalization of this data as it relates to a collective clinical framework. Additionally, understanding the context of these grief practices via demographic information could provide insight into cultural traditions and pressures within groups using varied commemorative practices.

The limited demographic characteristics of the sample also feeds into another limitation that results from the selection procedure of convenient sampling. There was little effort put into procuring a diverse sample population, instead aiming for a larger sampling pool. Subsequently, most participants came from similar backgrounds (young adults primarily college students within the Salt Lake City area) as they were involved in the sampling process similarly. That being said, the results of valuing all forms of grief commemoration can be beneficial to any person (Hoy, 2013).

An additional limitation is the inability to identify correlation verses causation. This study aims to prove that non-traditional means of commemoration are just as effective, if not more beneficial, than traditional commemoration. Yet, it is almost impossible to isolate the reported positive affect of said commemoration as a cause of changes in mood. A reported increase in positive affect may be attributed to other reasons entirely unrelated to grief. Thus, limitations exist within the bounds of isolating factors and proving responses.

Implications

In terms of implications of this study for actual practice, grief counselors can hopefully implement varied suggestions into clinical practice of introducing and encouraging the client to participate in whatever form of commemorative practices which resonate best for them. The results of this study should provide fellow peers as well as the clinical community with increased awareness of diverse commemorative practices, including ample support for the bereaved to carry out these practices as they need. This could take the form of continuing to support and advocate for bereavement leave policies for students on college campuses, implementing peer led community grief support groups, and providing professionals with additional understanding of the uses of varied forms of commemorative practices.

A primary aim of this study was to understand grief responses and subsequent commemorative practices within young adults. Thus, the hope is to spread this research among other young adults and hopefully reduce the stigma of a “death-denying” society. As one of the participants reflected on her self-defined non-traditional commemoration, she said, “I don’t think most people get to partake in this kind of ceremony where all of [the deceased’s] friends got to

participate in spreading his ashes. I feel very lucky to have done that. It was a huge part in my healing process.”

Conclusion

Commemoration is deeply personal and vitally important to the grieving process (Balk, 2011). The act of commemorating can range from a funeral to a series of letters written from the bereaved to their loved one (Hoy, 2013). The importance and benefit of commemoration can be enhanced by a diverse availability of options for various commemorative practices. Traditional (i.e. funerals, religious services, etc.) and nontraditional (i.e. websites, art projects, etc.) commemorative practices are both beneficial to the bereaved. “Human beings seek meaning in mourning and do so by struggling to construct a coherent account of their bereavement that preserves a sense of continuity with who they have been while also integrating the reality of the changed world into their conception of who they must be now” (Neimeyer et al., 2011, pg. 331).

Results from this study show a higher reporting for positive emotions following participants’ use of non-traditional commemorative practices vs. traditional commemorative practices. This illustrates the significant benefit in encouraging and participating in diverse methods of commemoration. In contrast, there was higher reporting for negative feelings following traditional commemoration rather than non-traditional. Yet, when engaging in both types of commemoration, positive feelings were unanimously experienced. This study has effectively shown that all forms of commemorative practices are beneficial long-term, however, the methods originally viewed as “non-traditional” appear to make a great impact on young adults.

REFERENCES

- Balk, D. E. (2011). *Helping the Bereaved College Student*. New York City, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Brimberry, T. (2015). The impact of engagement with social networking on the grieving process in bereaved emerging adults. *Adler School of Professional Psychology, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*.
- Dudley, J. R. (2011). *Research methods for social work: Being producers and consumers of research* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gross, D. (1992). *Discovering anthropology*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Hoy, W. G. (2013). *Do Funerals Matter?* New York City, NY: Routledge.
- Malone, P. A. (2016). *Counseling adolescents through loss, grief, and trauma*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Mearns, S. J. (2014). The impact of loss on adolescents: developing appropriate support. *International Journal of Palliative Nursing*, Volume 6, Issue 1.
- Neimeyer, R., Prigerson, H., & Davies, B. (2002). Mourning and meaning. *American Behavioral approach* 46(2), 235-251
- Neimeyer, R. A., Harris, D. L., Winokuer, H. R., & Thornton, G. F. (2011). *Grief and bereavement in contemporary society: Bridging research and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Sanders, J. (2011). Bereavement websites for children and young people. *Bereavement Care*, Volume 30, Issue 2.
- Servaty-Seib, H. L., & Fajgenbaum, D. C. (2015). *We Get It*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publications.

Walter, C. A., & McCoyd, J. L. (2016). *Grief and loss across the lifespan: A biopsychosocial perspective*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

APPENDIX A- Interview Question Guide

- Relationship to loved one
- Age candidate was upon death of loved one
- How long it has been since death of loved one?
- What intentional practices/activities do you engage in to remember this person (by yourself or with family)?
- Would you describe these practices as traditional or non-traditional?
- How often do you commemorate?
 - Has this amount changed over time?
- How does your commemoration affect your relationships?
- How does your commemoration affect your day-to-day activities?
- How do you feel after your commemoration?

APPENDIX B, Consent Cover Letter
Young Adults, The Experience and Impact of Commemorative Practices

The purpose of this research study is to identify the differences between traditional and nontraditional commemorative practices in young adults ages 18-35 who have lost a loved one in the past 10 years. This study will also examine how these commemorative practices are experienced, as well as the subsequent impact of these practices upon young adults.

Your participation in this study includes answering an interview-style question guide in which you will be asked questions regarding your relationship to your loved one and what you have done/do to grieve your loss. You will also be asked how you feel these practices have affected you.

There are no physical risks associated with this study, however, answering questions and talking about your deceased loved one might initiate some emotional triggers or feelings of sadness. Additionally, there are no direct benefits to you as a result of participating in this study. However, the results of this research could aid the clinical grieving process by demonstrating the importance of diverse commemorative networks. Subsequently, traditional grief psychotherapy could be encouraged to include an array of commemorative practices.

Your answers will be kept confidential and protected as they will be stored on an online password protected platform. Additionally, your responses will contain no identifying information. Upon completion of this study, all of your responses will be deleted.

If you have any questions complaints or if you feel you have been harmed by this research please contact Lynette Randall, Primary Investigator, BSW (May 2019), College of Social Work, University of Utah.

Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at irb@hsc.utah.edu.

It should take approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to take part. You can choose not to finish the questionnaire or omit any question you prefer not to answer without penalty or loss of benefits.

By returning this questionnaire, you are giving your consent to participate. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. And please know that you are not alone in your grieving process.