RESEARCH ARTICLE

JOURNAL of COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY WILEY

Competing aspects of the rural Arab mothers' bereavement experience

Akhlas Ismail 🄳 | Rachel Dekel

Faculty of Social Sciences, The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

Correspondence
Akhlas Ismail, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52900, Israel.
Email: akhnassar@gmail.com

Abstract

The study applied relational dialectics theory to explore competing discourses in bereaved Arab mothers' talk about their bereavement experience in a collective space in rural areas of Israel, and to understand how the interaction between these discourses gives meaning to their experience. Fifteen bereaved mothers were interviewed. The mothers, aged 28–46 years, had children (aged 1–6 years) who died between 2 and 7 years previously. Analysis of the interviews revealed three main discursive struggles that characterize mothers' bereavement experience: (a) moving closer versus keeping one's distance; (b) social harmony versus personal needs; and (c) criticism of ongoing grief versus criticism of returning to routine functioning. The advantage of being part of a close-knit social network is that it provides emotional cushioning to the bereaved. This cushioning, however, does not preclude the struggle to attain normalcy after the tragedy within the parameters of the contradictory societal expectations and needs of the mourner.

KEYWORDS
Arab, collective society, maternal bereavement

1 | INTRODUCTION

The terms grief, mourning, and bereavement are frequently used interchangeably, but their meanings vary. Grief refers to a person's response to loss (Simon et al., 2020), mourning is the external expression of that grief, and bereavement is the state of having experienced a loss as a result of which grief and mourning take place (Buglass, 2010).

One of the most traumatic causes of intensive grief is the loss of a child (Lykke et al., 2019; Wonch Hill et al., 2017). Mothers from different cultures are at high risk of intense grief, as well as mental and functional distress, when faced with the loss of a child (Hvidtjørn et al., 2018; Polita et al., 2020). Cross-cultural findings revealed powerful grief responses, particularly if the death was sudden or it occurred in violent circumstances (Lichtenthal et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2018). A study conducted on 155 bereaved parents indicated that 53% of parents whose children died of violent causes could not make sense of their loss, compared to 32% of the parents who lost a child to natural causes. The former spoke of the imperfection of the world and the brevity of life more frequently in their narratives than the latter, who were more likely to find benefit in the loss in the form of personal growth (Lichtenthal et al., 2013).

Home accidents are one form of violent death. Arab children in Israel make up only 25% of the child population but they account for 57% of deaths in home accidents annually (Betrem Organization for Child Safety, 2020). Home accidents that result in death are generally violent. They are difficult to contain, especially for the mother who ascribes a great measure of the blame to herself. Mothers feel responsible not only for causing the child's death but also for the violent way in which it occurred, causing intense physical suffering for the child (Ismail, 2022).

The culturally sensitive literature draws attention to how culture defines the path individuals follow when grieving (Smørholm, 2016). Studies have emphasized the cultural elements present in the grieving process (Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017; Silverman et al., 2021; Yasien-Esmael et al., 2020), where the living circumstances of the bereaved were of significant relevance to the extent and manner in which they managed their grief (Harris, 2010; Hemer, 2010; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). Therefore, one must be acquainted with the relationship between culture and grieving in a particular community to get a deep understanding of the grieving experience of people from different social backgrounds (Rosenblatt et al., 2008). There are few studies about loss based on Arab samples in Israel, especially in the case of loss of a child in home accidents. In the present study, we used relational dialectic theory (RDT, Baxter, 2011) to identify competing discourses in bereaved Arab mothers' talk about their bereavement in a collective space in rural areas of Israel and to understand how the interplay between these discourses ascribes meaning to their experience. This paper introduces the theoretical framework of RDT and discusses the relevant discourses of bereavement in Arabic culture. Next, it introduces the methodology of the research. The findings are divided into three main sections describing the discursive struggles that characterize mothers' bereavement experience. Finally, the discussion addresses the layers of complexity in the bereavement process, as experienced by the bereaved mothers.

1.1 | Theoretical framework

RDT is based on the perception that experiences, such bereavement, are understood through a cultural system of meaning known as discourses (Baxter, 2011). These discourses often compete and struggle with one another for legitimation. At any given time, discourses become centripetal or dominant, such as the discourse of mourning patterns, or centrifugal or marginalized (i.e., anything that deviates from the centripetal discourse). RDT researchers focused on identifying such discourses and how they give meaning to the experience.

Utterance and utterance chains are key concepts in RDT. Utterances form chains, and the links of the chain consist of anticipated and prior speech events. The first and the second links of the utterance chain, the distal link already spoken and the distal one not yet-spoken reflect the essential effect that culture has on the creation and

meaning of discourses. The distal already spoken link mirrors the cultural discourses presented in conversation, whereas the distal not yet-spoken link reflects the anticipated cultural responses to any given utterance. The remaining links of the utterance chain, the proximal already-spoken and the proximal not yet-spoken are situated interpersonally. The former refers to prior discourses within a given relationship, the latter the anticipated responses in future interactions.

In addition to recognizing competing discourses, RDT focuses also on how discursive interplay constructs meaning. Baxter (2011) addressed three patterns of dialogic interplay: diachronic separation, synchronic interplay, and discursive transformation. Diachronic separation is a pattern of interplay in which particular discourses become privileged and others are marginalized. Within this pattern, the potential of the relational parties to achieve meanings is limited. In the synchronic interplay, multiple discourses co-occur in a given utterance. In the transformative struggle of the third pattern, discourses transcend polemic struggle and new meanings are created.

1.2 | Discourses of bereavement

When exploring bereavement experiences of individuals, the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism seems especially relevant (Pressman & Bonanno, 2007; Seake-Kwawu, 2020). Researchers have debated whether individualism and collectivism represent opposites in a bipolar sequence, or whether they are orthogonal, both coexisting within the individual. In a review and cross-national meta-analysis of 83 studies, Oyserman et al. (2002) stated that "although sometimes seen as simple opposites, it is probably more accurate to conceptualize individualism and collectivism as worldviews that differ in the issues they make salient" (p. 5). Collectivist values contain a sense of belonging and duty to close relationships with group members, maintaining in-group harmony and avoiding conflicts, alongside a preference for an indirect communication style. Individualism is associated mainly with valuing personal independence, distinguishing the self from others, and striving for personal goals over those of society, in conjunction with a preference for a direct communication style (Oyserman et al., 2002). Various studies reported high levels of collectivism in Arab countries (Darwish & Huber, 2003). The Arab-Israeli culture also reflects strong collectivist-communal values, with education oriented toward group solidarity, stable relationships, cooperation, and helpfulness (Scharf & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2003).

Social support is important in the loss crisis (Cao et al., 2020), but so is privacy in mourning (Hastings, 2000; Petronio, 2002; Toller, 2008). While collective societies, such as the Arab one in Israel, provide support that may be essential to bereavement, at the same time it may often involve an invasion of privacy. Traditionally, the idea of privacy comes from the difference between "private" and "public," a distinction rooted in the natural need of the individual to distinguish themselves from the outer world (Lukács, 2016). Regarding grief, privacy is a vital need in the grieving process; if it is lacking, it could exacerbate the grieving (Basinger et al., 2016; McBride & Toller, 2011; Petronio, 2002). Bereaved people may want to protect information for various reasons, including a desire to avoid vulnerability, a fear of discussing uncomfortable topics (Petronio, 2002), and a need to protect themselves from hurtful comments that challenge how they cope with their grief (McBride & Toller, 2011). In general, the limits between private and public differ in various societies (Lukács, 2016). The above findings regarding privacy and grieving originate in Western societies with unique characteristics. By contrast, Arab society is collectivist and extensive and close relationships are maintained with the extended family and the wider social circle (Lapidot-Lefler & Hosri, 2016). Nevertheless, to the bereaved grief appears to be a private event cross-culturally, including groups with a collective orientation (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013).

Despite the need of the bereaved to advance at their own pace, cultural expectations may put pressure on them to adhere to a certain timeline (Fu et al., 2004; Silverman et al., 2021). The findings of research conducted on Western bereaved parents highlighted the tension between social demands on the bereaved to function and their needs (McBride & Toller, 2011). In Arab society, priority is given to returning to daily life and functioning. Prolonged grief and mourning, manifested in impaired functioning, are perceived as an impediment to the return to normal

daily life (Yasien-Esmael & Rubin, 2005). The period of mourning is not limited, but bereaved mothers are expected to resume their daily functioning and continue to care for their remaining children. Fulfilling all their family and social obligations is an indication of accepting God's will (Yasien Esmael et al., 2018). The question is whether the external expectations of the mourner correspond to the needs of the bereaved mother and whether mothers must adapt to social requirements. The general expectation in collective societies is one of conformity with social norms (Fu et al., 2004). Therefore, grieving mothers are not exempt from making the sacrifices needed to meet this expectation, despite their internal needs during the grieving process which may not align with this expectation. Based on the above review and the choice of RDT as the theoretical lens, we formulated the next questions to guide our analyses:

RQ: Which competing cultural norms and expectations, known as discourses, do mothers face in their bereavement experience in a collective space in rural areas of Israel, and how does the interaction between these discourses give meaning to their experience?

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Participants

The study involved 15 Arab mothers living in the north of Israel who experienced child loss by home accident 2–7 years before the time of the study. Of the 15 children who died, 6 were male and 9 female, ranging in age between 1 and 6 years. The mothers' age at the time of the loss ranged from 28 to 46 years. At the time of the loss, all our interviewees were married; at the time of the interview, one became widowed and two had divorced. Most of the mothers were housewives, and a few had academic education. Table 1 provides a summary of the mothers' demographics (participants' names were changed).

We recruited the mothers through social service workers at welfare offices and treatment centers. Initially, 22 mothers were contacted, of whom seven refused to take part because of the sensitivity of the topic.

2.2 | Interviews

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the university. After the mothers provided initial consent, a phone call was conducted with them, in which they were given detailed information about the objectives of the study, and a date was set for the interview at the mothers' home (at their request). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants during the interviews, and additional detailed information was provided to all the mothers about the research process and how the data would be used.

Data were collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews in Arabic, the participants' native language, over 1 year. Each interview lasted approximately 2 h and was completed in one session. Based on the interview guidelines (Appendix 1), the questions concerned the bereavement experience of the interviewees in their social-collective space. Sample questions were: How would you describe your communication with people in your circle after the loss? What were some things that people in your community said or did that were helpful in dealing with the loss? What were some things people in your community said or did that was harmful in dealing with the loss? The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first researcher. The transcripts were translated into English after the data analysis, and checked by three native speakers of Arabic who were fluent in English.

We paid careful attention to the protection of the mothers' wellbeing. The mothers were informed about the psychological support options available to them during the study, and they had access to the first researcher by phone. None of the mothers made use of these services. There was no dropout during the study.

TABLE 1 Participant demographics.

Name	Age	Marital status	Education	Living area	Employment	The dead child's sex	Child's age at death	Cause of the death	Time since the death
Fatma	32	M	High school	Rural	Housewife	Daughter	2 years old	TV fell on her	5 years earlier
Hala	31	M	High school	Rural	Housewife	Son	4 years old	A fall from the window	2 years earlier
Laila	39	M	High school	Rural	Housewife	Daughter	3 years old	A neighbor ran her over	5 years earlier
Hadjar	38	M	High school	Rural	Housewife	Daughter	16 years old	As a result of her falling down the stairs inside the home	4 years earlier
Samira	34	M	College	Rural	Teacher	Daughter	3 years old	A relative ran her over in the driveway	4 years earlier
Jamila	36	M	High school	Rural	Housewife	Daughter	5 years old	A neighbor ran her over in the driveway	3 and a half years earlier
Lubna	45	M	High school	Rural	Housewife	Son	2 years old	He was left in a car without ventilation when he was in the care of a relative who forgot to take him out	7 years earlier
Em Adal	40	M	High school	Rural	Cleaning worker	Daughter	5 years old	She was run over by a distant relative in the vehicle in which he used to drive her to and from school	2 and half years earlier
Nasren	33	D	High school	Rural	Secretary	Daughter	6 years old	Died in a house fire	6 years earlier
Miriam	33	M	College	Rural	Teacher	Son	6 years old	He was run over in the home driveway by a relative	4 years earlier
Hanan	28	M	College	Rural	Teacher	Son	3 years old	A fall from the window	3 years earlier
Zinab	43	W	High school	Rural	Housewife	Son	5 years old	He was run over by a neighbor in front of the parental home	4 years earlier
Khula	46	D	High school	Rural	Cleaning worker	Son	5 years old	He suffocated inside a refrigerator when playing hide-and-seek with his cousins	5 years earlier
Suhir	28	M	High school	Rural	Housewife	Daughter	15 years old	A neighbor ran her over in the driveway	5 years earlier
Tahani	38	M	College	Rural	Teacher	Daughter	6 years old	A relative ran her over in the driveway	3 years earlier

2.3 | Trustworthiness

First, the first author sent a draft of the analysis to the mothers by messenger apps to check the extent to which they reflected their experiences, after which she conducted a follow-up conversation with the mothers by phone (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, reflexivity helped increase the trustworthiness of the findings by examining the potential influence the first author, who led the analysis of the findings, may have had on the interpretation of the data (Lowes & Prowse, 2001). Reflexivity served to minimize social and religious biases that may have resulted from belonging to the same culture and religion as the interviewees, and the biases of the researcher's academic and clinical knowledge as a psychotherapist and social worker who worked with mothers and children. Finally, this study was guided by the postdoctoral supervisor (the second author), with whom the data analysis was reviewed until agreement was reached between the two authors.

2.4 | Data analysis

The study is part of a broader project based on data collected in 2018 as part of doctoral dissertation research dedicated to bereavement experience following child loss. A former study, with a different focus, was published. The current study conducted a secondary analysis of part of the dissertation data. This involved an in-depth analysis of one aspect of the data that was only partially addressed in the primary study (Heaton, 2008). The two researchers analyzed the mothers' talk about their bereavement experience using both a modified version of a descriptive phenomenological approach and contrapuntal analysis. Phenomenological methodology seeks to achieve in-depth understanding of subjective experiences and their meaning by promoting variant themes through a process of identifying, comparing, and contrasting thematic categories identified within the data (Shakedi, 2006). Like phenomenological theory, contrapuntal analysis examines the data to identify themes, it is focused on the interplay of competing socio-cultural discourses (Baxter, 2011).

Contrapuntal analysis included three steps: identifying discourses in the text, identifying competing discourses, and investigating how the interplay between discourses constructs meaning in the text. To identify discourses within our texts, the first author read each interview to get an overall picture of the body of material as a whole. Next, the researcher conducted a more deliberate reading of the transcripts to identify and arrange the thematic categories in accordance with the objectives of the study. The researcher then grouped individual units of meaning discovered in each interview into larger discourses. Next, the researcher compiled a list of the most commonly occurring thematic categories and identified discourses across interviews by reevaluating the interviews and comparing the various thematic categories. Finally, the researcher identified recurring topics and cross-referenced the thematic categories with the discourses that appeared. This stage was accompanied by a re-examination of the analysis by the second author.

After locating discourses in the text, the two researchers identified competing discourses and examined their interplay patterns: diachronic separation, hybridization/transformation, and synchronic interplay (manifested in patterns of negating, countering, and entertaining (Baxter, 2011). Negating occurred when a person presented alternative competing discourses for the purpose of rejecting or dismissing a dominant discourse as irrelevant. Countering is less polemic than negating, and competing discourses are given partial legitimacy. It takes place when a dominant discourse is replaced with an alternative one, often by using such words as *however*, *but*, *yet*, *although*, and *nonetheless*. Finally, entertaining occurs when a person voices one discourse as an option among additional possible discourses and no one discourse is privileged, often by using such words as *may*, *it seems*, and *it is possible* (Baxter, 2011).

3 | FINDINGS

The research sought to understand the interplay between competing discourses present in bereaved mothers' talk about their bereavement experiences in the collective space. Our analysis revealed three primary discursive struggles: (a) moving closer versus keeping one's distance; (b) social harmony versus personal needs; and (c) criticism of ongoing grief versus criticism of returning to routine functioning. In the results section, we reveal how these three primary discursive struggles animate the bereavement experience of mothers. We begin with a short description of the mothers' emotional reactions.

3.1 | Emotional reactions to the loss of a young child

The circumstances of a violent, sudden death have particular consequences for bereavement. Fatma, who lost her daughter about 5 years before the interview, described bodily functioning through metaphors from the mechanical world. She made references to robots and computers to illustrate the disconnect between the body and the mind, as they manage their daily routine, without being able to experience life to the fullest. Her description illustrates the separation she made between body and soul: the ruined soul, which reflects the self in the shadow of loss, and the body that appears to be alive and functioning, but does not belong to the experience of self.

> You know, since she died I no longer know happiness. I miss out on beautiful days. I notice them, I just can't take them in. I can't enjoy them. It's like installing computer software and the computer runs based on it... something that is dead and alive at the same time. [Fatma]

The complexity of dealing with loss also stems from the trauma involved. The traumatic memory of the harsh and violent circumstances of the loss is accompanied by the distressing images imprinted in memory as a result of exposure to the event, owing to the presence of the bereaved mothers at home or close by when the event occurred. Furthermore, the mothers continue to live in the same environment in which the incident occurred.

> I'm the one who saw him lying on the floor, and the image continues to torment me... As for me, I spend most of my time at home. Anywhere I go around the house, I'm faced with reminders of the accident. I look out of the window and see him stretched out on the ground. [Hala]

In sum, mothers are at high risk of intense grief when faced with the violent loss of a child, but the environmental conditions in which the bereaved mother lives are key determinants in the experience of bereavement after the loss. The following sub-themes discuss the role of collectivism in dealing with loss.

3.2 | Competing discourses: Moving close versus keeping one's distance

Cases like this require a reliable, empathic social network. Rural life, especially in a collective society, where everyone knows everyone, is characterized by close relationships with relatives, neighbors, and others in the community. This characteristic has an advantage, as described by grieving mothers, in that it provides an opportunity for instrumental support, mainly from the extended family.

> Collective societies have much to offer by way of contributory support in that everyone knowing everyone means for the most part that everyone cares. You can get a helping hand from a neighbor nearby just the same as you could from a relative. [Laila]

> I remember the way that the neighbors brought us food and helped with practical and technical tasks in preparing for the funeral. We as a family couldn't have managed this on our own. [Hadjar]

The help is not limited to instrumental support during the funeral, but includes continued support during the initial period after the loss. During this time, the mourners remain surrounded by the physical presence of the extended family and neighbors.

> Even after the funeral, the extended family and neighbors don't allow you to be left alone. They come and visit all the time, trying to keep us busy. Indeed, sometimes it helps. [Samira]

Alongside the above discourse of close relationships as a source of help, mothers also voiced the discourse of infringement of privacy in their grieving experience, when close companionship can result in lack of consideration for personal space. Emerging at the distal already spoken link in the utterance chain, this discourse aligned with the cultural expectation of collective life.

> Sometimes there is a need to disconnect from everyone. This is just to have some time alone to be with myself only or to be just with close relatives, especially with my mother and sisters. It's difficult to make it happen. Sometimes the visits become annoying. Despite all this, it's hard to tell distant relatives and neighbors that I need to be by myself. Then I feel a social commitment to welcome people even though I may not feel like bothering with anyone at all. [Jamila]

The infringement of privacy also appears in the wider social space. Exposure to the villagers' reactions is inevitable when attending local events. This can lead to apprehension when faced with the prospect of attending a public event.

> When I first attended a wedding after losing my son, I felt like everyone was looking at me. It was actually true. Suddenly there is more interest in my life, and it bothers me. Sometimes women would ask me, "Are your children alright?" They're alright. The very question reminds me of L's loss. The fact that they ask about the welfare of my children makes me feel the loss. Before the loss there were no such questions, and suddenly such questions became routine in interactions with people. [Lubna]

Continuing with the above experience of inevitable exposure to the villagers' reactions, competing discourses (moving close vs. keeping one's distance) intensified further in the shadow of unwelcome and poorly formulated questions that lack empathy in the wider social circle.

> Distant community members allow themselves to ask me sensitive questions. It bothers me that wherever I go, they ask me: "Are you the mother of the daughter who was run over? We saw her on the Internet, we saw her pictures." [Em Adal]

As noted above, although the relationship is described as close, and it has positive sides, the bereaved mothers also need to move away from the community to experience their personal grief and live their lives in privacy. This need increases because of the difficulty of dealing with the intrusion of the environment that characterizes collective life.

3.3 | Competing discourses: Social harmony versus personal needs

The needs of society and of the mothers cannot always be met at the same time. For example, Nasren described the war she waged to preserve her daughter's visual memory after her appearance was damaged by the fire. She

prevented visits by family and acquaintances during the hospitalization period, and prevented the final separation from the body during the funeral. Her request was received with lack of understanding on the part of the family and the locals. Nasren's words described the struggle between the discourses of maintaining social harmony versus meeting personal needs. Emerging at the distal already spoken link in the utterance chain, these competing discourses aligned with the cultural expectation of social harmony and voiced the diachronic pattern, where the social harmony discourse is privileged over the other.

> My daughter's appearance drastically changed. I didn't want anyone to see her, not even relatives to see her. My dream was for everyone to remember her smile and all that she used to be. We had to go to the hospital to bring the body for burial. I didn't want anyone to see her, I didn't want relatives or people to be there. I went with only two trusted acquaintances because I really didn't want anyone to see her. Everyone took it really hard. [Nasren]

The struggle between the two discourses was manifested in additional expressions. As a cultural habit, it is customary to ask permission from a grieving family for an event such as a wedding party, planned before the tragedy, to take place near their home. There is a social expectation (distal already spoken) of flexibility on the part of the bereaved, so that if they refuse and prevent the event from taking place, they face criticism for being "unreasonable." To escape this conflict, the bereaved often decide to approve a joyous celebration nearby despite the toll it takes on them. Miriam's example also voiced the diachronic pattern, where the social harmony discourse is privileged over the personal bereavement needs:

> Seven months later, there was a relative's wedding next door. They contacted us and asked us how we felt about postponing the wedding, which had been set before the tragedy. However, we agreed since we couldn't just tell them to postpone it. It felt impossible for me to have such an expectation in circumstances such as these. I didn't want to be a factor interfering with their wedding party. [Miriam]

Sacrificing her emotional needs is the price the bereaved mother pays for the solace offered by her community. The lack of harmony between emotion and behavior is reflected in the participants' accounts. This dissonance requires emotional effort that the bereaved mother exerts to bridge the gap between her needs and those of society.

> Sometimes you have to adapt yourself to the environment. The event took place and I attended. In front of the people, I behaved normally, not wanting to disrupt their joy, but when I got home I cried for hours. [Hanan]

Collectivism sets the standard for what society expects from the individual. In many cases, there is a conflict between the needs of the bereaved and those of the group. Managing this gap is not an easy task, as it often involves giving up one's personal needs.

3.4 | Competing discourses: Ongoing grief versus returning to routine functioning

In a collective community such as the rural Arab society, in which people know each other and even lead close lives, there is no way to avoid social reactions to the ways in which the bereaved choose to mourn. Mothers referenced both relational and cultural messages indicating that there is a "limit" on how long a person should grieve. Amid the cultural expectation (distal already-spoken discourse) that a person should work through the grieving process as

quickly as possible, Zinab and other participants felt that friends and family members (proximal already-spoken) were driven by the desire to restore normal functioning. This attitude was common as the bereavement process progressed.

> It bothers me that people around me are pushing me to go out, participate, and conduct myself in a way that I'm not ready for yet. It's bothersome in that it cancels my experience of grief. [Zinab]

A common practice of urging bereaved mothers to move on at a quicker pace does more harm than good, and false comforters are perceived as a burden. Emerging at the distal already spoken link in the utterance chain, this discourse aligned with cultural perspectives depicting prolonged grief as non-acceptance of God's will.

> There is a sentence that would bother me very much, which would be said to me, as if in consolation: "Why don't you go out? Your son is a bird in Paradise, why are you still crying? He's a bird in Paradise." [Khula]

Another example is wishing for the birth of a new child as compensation from God for the child who died. This leaves the suffering mother feeling undermined and belittled rather than consoled.

> Another thing that annoyed me was when they would say to me, "God will make it up to you and replace him." Yes, I believe God gives to people, but not in the sense of compensation, like a baby instead of a dead son. It's hurtful to hear this. Everyone has his place. [Hanan]

Despite the drive for normal functioning, social expectations in this regard are vague. Often criticism is voiced if the external manifestation is incompatible with the expectation of prolonged pain and grief for the dead, leaving the mothers with competing discourses of ongoing grief versus returning to routine functioning. An example of this is reflected in Suhir's words.

> When I talk to people, I hear all kinds of phrases that bother and confuse me. On one hand, they urge me to forget. They say it's enough or that it has been a long time. On the other hand, my son, for example, was in kindergarten and asked to have a birthday party exactly 40 days after the loss. All I did was buy the cake and take it to the kindergarten. I was accused of neglecting the mourning. Some people said harsh things like, "her daughter just died and she's already buying cakes." They expect me not to cry and not to talk about it and at the same time, not to dress nicely or buy cakes. [Suhir]

Because of the ambivalence of society, bereaved mothers find themselves confused regarding the social behavior expected of them after the loss. They interpret the community as sending mixed messages regarding the appropriateness or lack thereof in their adjusting to family and social life following the tragedy.

> You don't understand anymore what people want from you. They push for normal functioning and criticize normal functioning at the same time. This has been to the extent that I heard tormenting statements related to my going out, my dress, even my pregnancy. As I told you, I decided to get pregnant three months after the loss of A. Some looked upon the pregnancy with a critical eye. They resented the idea that there has already been sexual contact between the grieving couple less than three months after her son's death. [Lubna]

Because in some cases the mothers felt confused, they marginalized the social discourses and granted legitimacy to the personal view, dismissing others' expectations of how they should grieve.

—WILEY—

> Everything is criticized... those who don't return to functioning are accused of intensifying the pain and exaggerating their response. In the end, both those who function and those who don't receive severe criticism from society. So it's better to stay away and that's what I do. [Tahani]

In sum, the bereavement process experienced by mothers when a child dies is severe. The complexity of dealing with loss also stems from the trauma involved, in addition to living in an environment that makes it difficult to cope with loss because of the above competing discourses.

4 | DISCUSSION

We drew on RDT to identify the discourses evoked in mothers' talk about their experience of bereavement in a collective space in rural areas of Israel, and to understand how the interplay between these discourses gives meaning to their experience. Our contrapuntal analysis identified three competing discourses that animated the mothers' characterizations of their bereavement experience: moving closer versus keeping one's distance, social harmony versus personal needs, and criticism of ongoing grief versus criticism of the returning to routine functioning.

As in previous studies, our findings revealed a high risk of intense grief when faced with the loss of a child in cases of violent or sudden death (Djelantik et al., 2020). At the same time, as in previous studies, we found that the environmental conditions in which the bereaved mother lives are key factors in the experience of bereavement after the loss (Silverman et al., 2021; Smørholm, 2016).

Bereaved mothers described how living in a collective environment worked to their advantage because their support system fit ideally within their comfort zone, offered primarily by their close friends and family. The members genuinely committed themselves to do what they deemed was best for the long-term emotional wellbeing and mental health of the bereaved. In this way, the bereaved were constantly made aware that they were in a safe and caring place (Ariapooran et al., 2018). At the same time, within these close-knit communities, there is another experience as well. Alongside the above discourse of close relationships as a source of help, mothers also voiced the discourse of infringement of privacy in their grieving experience, when close companionship can result in lack of consideration for personal space.

As shown in previous findings, the simultaneous needs for maintaining one's dignity and personal space, which is rooted in privacy, and the need for support and comfort, which is obtained by the revealing of one's inner feelings, conflict with each other (Petronio, 2002). In the present study, bereaved mothers were especially vulnerable to "boundary turbulence" in the extended family because they experienced multiple and simultaneous challenges related to privacy as a result of cultural and social expectations. The members of the extended family are not necessarily included within the privacy boundaries at all times during the bereavement. Nevertheless, collectivist-communal values of group solidarity, stable relationships, cooperation, and helpfulness seem to act as an unspoken invitation for prolonged visits at the mother's house, which are not necessarily compatible with their private bereavement needs. Boundary turbulence can result from additional situations (Petronio, 2002, 2010), for example, because of fuzzy boundaries caused by different perspectives of what is considered as shared or private information. Mothers remarked that when their child died, the details of their death were highly public, and as a consequence of rural life, the boundary surrounding the details of their death was permeable and included a large part of the community.

Our findings, as well as those of other researchers (Basinger et al., 2016; Bute & Brann, 2015; McBride & Toller, 2011; Steimel, 2021) revealed the need for new privacy norms for the bereaved as an important factor in their grieving process. A set of standards concerning privacy rules (opening up or becoming more protective) fluctuate to maintain stability. This is especially true when the need for privacy of the bereaved is severely challenged (Petronio, 2002). The current study showed that accepting a mother's need for privacy, which stands in

contrast with the cultural expectations, is likely to bring about confusion and discord. As the findings show, the ability to fulfill this need is limited in the face of collective life.

Mothers articulated also a discursive struggle between social harmony versus personal needs. These competing perspectives are consistent with long-standing cultural discourses regarding social harmony that influence mothers' reactions in social situations. As shown, it is not possible to simultaneously meet the needs of both the mourners and of the community. In this regard, the mothers voiced the diachronic pattern of spiraling inversion, where the social harmony discourse is privileged over the other. Conformity to the social norm in Arab society is a general expectation (Shapira, 2006). Grieving mothers are not exempt from making the sacrifices needed to meet this expectation despite their internal needs during the grieving process. Therefore, conflict resolution ultimately rested upon avoiding direct conflict and maintaining social harmony, including at the cost of denying one's personal needs. Similar findings have appeared in previous studies, although not in the context of mourning (Gomez & Taylor, 2018; Hook et al., 2009; Merkin, 2015).

Bereaved mothers have felt pressured by other family members, norms, and expectations to grieve in a certain way. Walter (2000) referred to the "policing of grief" through norms and expectations of grieving that determine how and how long to mourn. In rural life, where everyone knows everyone else, exposure to such policing is inevitable. Previous studies have indicated the need of mourners to advance at their own pace, without being compelled to return to routine functioning (Hannays-King et al., 2015; McBride & Toller, 2011). A current study found that it was difficult to satisfy this need in a collective setting. As in previous findings, bereaved mothers had to put their personal grieving needs on hold to accommodate the accepted time frame of society for returning to routine function (Hannays-King et al., 2015). In the circumstances of mourning, policing comments are often unclear and at times contradict each other. Bereaved mothers cited competing cultural discourses of ongoing grief versus returning to routine functioning. This ambiguity is found to burden the mourning itself by confusing the mothers and exposing them to inevitable social criticism. Consistent with other findings, grieving mothers in our study intentionally avoided social settings where they were likely to face criticism about the pace of their mourning (Hannays-King et al., 2015; McBride & Toller, 2011).

In sum, the bereavement process experienced by mothers when a child dies revealed several layers of complexity. The complexity of dealing with loss also stems from the trauma involved, in addition to living in an environment that makes it difficult to cope with loss because of the competing discourses regarding the needs and management of grief.

4.1 | Limitations and conclusions

Only 15 mothers were interviewed for the study, which limited the diversity of the sample. The grieving mothers came from similar socio-demographic backgrounds: most of them were homemakers, and only a few had higher education. Systematic comparison of these factors was beyond the scope of this study, yet they are likely to be significant for drawing conclusions. The data were obtained in a particular region of Israel, therefore our findings cannot be generalized to the entire Arab society in the country. Moreover, the data were collected at only one point in time, and the first researcher, who conducted the interviews, did not ask about the effect of passing time on the bereavement experience. Future longitudinal studies could provide a broader picture regarding the bereavement experience over time. Finally, the study focused on the bereavement experience in the social space, therefore there is no reference to the relationships at home. We recommend that future studies look at these aspects.

The study makes several contributions to the bereavement field. The use of RDT in the current research made it possible to examine how mothers experienced competing discourses and how the interplay of these competing discourses animated their bereavement experience. The conclusions of the study align with previous research that highlighted the role of the social network in the bereavement process (McBride & Toller, 2011; Toller, 2008). The grief is shared between the mother and the community to which she belongs. Therefore, a need exists at the social

level to raise awareness about the emotional needs of bereaved mothers. The suffering mothers yearn for space where they can grieve without being subjected to the judgment of the community. The social network has the power to satisfy this need by accepting the bereaved mother's mode of expression. Thus, it is important for the community to understand the needs of the bereaved and not to overlook their fundamental need for personal space (Hastings, 2000; Toller, 2008).

Therapists must address both the loss and the associated trauma. More than traditional techniques are required to properly gauge the adequate treatment, given the interpersonal challenges resulting from the traumatic loss of a child. Offering treatment in a welcoming and non-judgmental way can serve as a substitute for the failing social environment.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared. Because the data were collected in Arabic and have no translation, they are not available.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The author has no funding to declare and no conflict of interest. All procedures carried out in the study were in conformity with the ethical standards of Tel Aviv University ethical committees, where the doctoral research was carried out, and on which this article is based (written as part of a post-doc program at Bar-Ilan University - BIU). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

ORCID

Akhlas Ismail http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4694-0124

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1002/jcop.23026.

REFERENCES

Appel, D., & Papaikonomou, M. (2013). Narratives on death and bereavement from three South African cultures: An exploratory study. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, *23*(3), 453–458. https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2013.10820651

Ariapooran, S. P., Heidari, S. M. A., Asgari, M. P., Ashtarian, H. P., & Khezeli, M. P. (2018). Individualism-collectivism, social support, resilience and suicidal ideation among women with the experience of the death of a young person. *International Journal of Community Based Nursing and Midwifery*, *6*(3), 250–259.

Basinger, E. D., Wehrman, E. C., & McAninch, K. G. (2016). Grief communication and privacy rules: Examining the communication of individuals bereaved by the death of a family member. *Journal of Family Communication*, *16*(4), 285–302. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2016.1182534

Baxter, L. A. (2011). *Voicing relationships: A dialogic perspective*, Sage.

Betrem Organization for Child Safety. (2020). Report on Child Injuries from the Arab Society in Israel. Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Buglass, E. (2010). Grief and bereavement theories. *Nursing Standard*, *24*(41), 44–47.

Bute, J. J., & Brann, M. (2015). Co-ownership of private information in the miscarriage context. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *43*(1), 23–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2014.982686

Cao, X., Yang, C., & Wang, D. (2020). The impact on mental health of losing an only child and the influence of social support and resilience. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, *80*(4), 666–684. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818755284

Darwish, A. F. E., & Huber, G. L. (2003). Individualism vs collectivism in different cultures: A cross-cultural study. *Intercultural Education*, *14*(1), 47–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/1467598032000044647

Djelantik, A. A. A. M. J., Smid, G. E., Mroz, A., Kleber, R. J., & Boelen, P. A. (2020). The prevalence of prolonged grief disorder in bereaved individuals following unnatural losses: Systematic review and meta regression analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *265*, 146–156. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.01.034

Fu, H., Watkins, D., & Hui, E. K. P. (2004). Personality correlates of the disposition towards interpersonal forgiveness: A Chinese perspective. *International Journal of Psychology*, *39*, 305–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/00207590344000402

Gomez, C., & Taylor, K. A. (2018). Cultural differences in conflict resolution strategies: A US–Mexico comparison. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, *18*(1), 33–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595817747638

Hannays-King, C., Bailey, A., & Akhtar, M. (2015). Social support and black mothers' bereavement experience of losing a child to gun homicide. *Bereavement Care*, *34*(1), 10–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/02682621.2015.1028199

Harris, D. (2010). Oppression of the bereaved: A critical analysis of grief in western society. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, *60*(3), 241–253. https://doi.org/10.2190/OM.60.3.c

Hastings, S. O. (2000). Self-disclosure and identity management by bereaved parents. *Communication Studies*, *51*, 352–371. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970009388531

Heaton, J. (2008). Secondary analysis of qualitative data: An overview. *Historical. Social Research*, *33*(3), 33–45. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20762299

Hemer, S. R. (2010). Grief as social experience: Death and bereavement in Lihir, Papua New Guinea. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, *21*(3), 281–297. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1757-6547.2010.00097.x

Hook, J. N., Worthington, Jr., E. L., & Utsey, S. O. (2009). Collectivism, forgiveness, and social harmony. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *37*(6), 821–847. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000008326546

Hvidtjørn, D., Prinds, C., Bliddal, M., Henriksen, T. B., Cacciatore, J., & O'Connor, M. (2018). Life after the loss: Protocol for a Danish longitudinal follow-up study unfolding life and grief after the death of a child during pregnancy from gestational week 14, during birth or in the first 4 weeks of life. *BMJ Open*, *8*(12), e024278. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-024278

Ismail, A. (2022). Arab muslim mothers' struggle attributing meaning to child loss in home accidents. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *27*(7), 642–660. https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2021.2013673

Kofod, E. H., & Brinkmann, S. (2017). Grief as a normative phenomenon: The diffuse and ambivalent normativity of infant loss and parental grieving in contemporary Western culture. *Culture & Psychology*, *23*(4), 519–533. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X17692294

Lapidot-Lefler, N., & Hosri, H. (2016). Cyberbullying in a diverse society: Comparing Jewish and Arab adolescents in Israel through the lenses of individualistic versus collectivist cultures. *Social Psychology of Education*, *19*(3), 569–585.

Lichtenthal, W. G., Neimeyer, R. A., Currier, J. M., Roberts, K., & Jordan, N. (2013). Cause of death and the quest for meaning after the loss of a child. *Death Studies*, *37*, 311–342. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2012.673533

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.

Lowes, L., & Prowse, M. A. (2001). Standing outside the interview process? The illusion of objectivity in phenomenological data generation. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, *38*, 471–480.

Lukács, A. (2016). What is privacy? The history and definition of privacy. Ph.D. dissertation, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, University of Szeged.

Lykke, C., Ekholm, O., Schmiegelow, K., Olsen, M., & Sjøgren, P. (2019). Anxiety and depression in bereaved parents after losing a child due to life-limiting diagnoses: A Danish nationwide questionnaire survey. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, *58*(4), 596–604. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2019.06.025

McBride, M. C., & Toller, P. (2011). Negotiation of face between bereaved parents and their social networks. *Southern Communication Journal*, *76*(3), 210–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940903477647

Merkin, R. (2015). The relationship between individualism/collectivism consultation and harmony needs. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, *40*, 2016. http://immi.se/intercultural/nr39/merkin.html

Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2002). Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin*, *128*(1), 3–72. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.128.1.3

Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Suny Press.

Petronio, S. (2010). Communication privacy management theory: What do we know about family privacy regulation? *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *2*(3), 175–196. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2010.00052.x

Polita, N. B., de Montigny, F., Neris, R. R., Alvarenga, W. A., Silva-Rodrigues, F. M., Leite, A. C. A. B., & Nascimento, L. C. (2020). The experiences of bereaved parents after the loss of a child to cancer: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing*, *37*(6), 444–457. https://doi.org/10.1177/1043454220944059

Pressman, D. L., & Bonanno, G. A. (2007). With whom do we grieve? Social and cultural determinants of grief processing in the United States and China. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *24*(5), 729–746. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407507081458

Rothaupt, J. W., & Becker, K. (2007). A literature review of Western bereavement theory: From decathecting to continuing bonds. *The Family Journal*, 15(1), 6–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480706294031

Rosenblatt, P. C. (2008). Grief across cultures: A review and research agenda. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, & W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research and practice: Advances in theory and intervention* (pp. 207–222). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/14498-010

Ross, V., Kõlves, K., Kunde, L., & De Leo, D. (2018). Parents' experiences of suicide-bereavement: A qualitative study at 6 and 12 months after loss. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(4), 618. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15040618

Scharf, M., & Hertz-Lazarowitz, R. (2003). Social networks in the school context: Effects of culture and gender. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 20(6), 843–858. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407503206007

Seake-Kwawu, D. Z. (2020). *The Impact of Attachment and Culture on Grief Intensity During Bereavement* (Master's thesis). Utrecht University, Netherlands.

Shakedi, A. (2006). Words which attempt to touch: Qualitative research— Theories and implementation. Ramot.

Shapira, T. (2006). *Barring and empowerment in the educational and public spheres: women in the Arab educational system in Israe.l* PhD dissertation, University of Haifa, Haifa.

Silverman, G. S., Baroiller, A., & Hemer, S. R. (2021). Culture and grief: Ethnographic perspectives on ritual, relationships and remembering. *Death Studies*, 45(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2020.1851885

Simon, N. M., Shear, M. K., Reynolds, C. F., Cozza, S. J., Mauro, C., Zisook, S., Skritskaya, N., Robinaugh, D. J., Malgaroli, M., Spandorfer, J., & Lebowitz, B. (2020). Commentary on evidence in support of a grief-related condition as a DSM diagnosis. *Depression and Anxiety*, 37(1), 9–16. https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22985

Smørholm, S. (2016). Suffering peacefully: Experiences of infancy death in contemporary Zambia. *Ethos (Berkeley, Calif.)*, 44(3), 333–351. https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12126

Steimel, S. (2021). Communication privacy management and pregnancy loss in interpersonal workplace communication. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 44, 397–418. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2020.1843579

Toller, P. W. (2008). Bereaved parents' negotiation of identity following the death of a child. *Communication Studies*, 59(4), 306–321. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970802467379

Walter, T. (2000). Grief narratives: The role of medicine in the contemporary policing of grief. *Anthropology & Medicine*, 7(1), 97–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/136484700109377

Wonch Hill, P., Cacciatore, J., Shreffler, K. M., & Pritchard, K. M. (2017). The loss of self: The effect of miscarriage, stillbirth, and child death on maternal self-esteem. *Death Studies*, 41(4), 226–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2016.1261204

Yasien Esmael, H., Eshel, Y., & Shimshon Rubin, S. (2018). Resilience and adjustment to widowhood in the Israeli Arab Muslim society: A new perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(2), 158–170. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21930

Yasien-Esmael, H., & Rubin, S. S. (2005). The meaning structures of muslim bereavements in Israel: Religious traditions, mourning practices, and human experience. *Death Studies*, 29(6), 495–518. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180590962668

Yasien-Esmael, H., Rubin, S. S., & Eshel, Y. (2020). Widowhood in the Israeli Arab Muslim Society. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 80(3), 420–439. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222817737229

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please tell me about the event of the loss of your child.
2. How did your feelings and reactions change following the death and over the years?
3. How would you describe your communication with people in the social space after the loss?
4. What were things people said or did that was helpful in dealing with the loss?
5. What were things people said or did that was harmful in dealing with the loss?
6. Have you experienced a conflict between different needs, yours and those of your community?