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Continuing bonds of bereaved Muslims mothers with their young dead child

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ABSTRACT

Based on continuing bonds theory, this research examined the experience and manifestations of continuing bonds of bereaved Muslim mothers with their children who died in home accidents. This qualitative phenomenological study is based on interviews with 15 bereaved mothers (aged 28–46 years) whose children (aged 1–6 years) died 2–7 years before the interviews. Analysis revealed three themes: efforts to continue the physical bonds, challenges in the continuing bonds in cases of traumatic death, and belief in afterlife as the main element of the continuing bonds. The traumatic circumstances of the death challenged the ability to maintain the bond based on positive memories without it being overwhelmed by the traumatic memories of the last moments of the child's life. Religious beliefs played an important role in the characteristics of the bond. Maintaining the bond requires professionals to provide a therapeutic environment where bereaved mothers feel safe talking about it.

Introduction

Home accidents caused by events such as being run over by car, a fall from a window, fire, choking, and suffocation are among the leading causes of death for children worldwide (Abu-Bakr et al., 2018), as well as in Israel (Beterem Organization for Child Safety, 2022). These types of accidents accounted for 31% of all deaths due to unintentional injury of Israeli children in the period 2018–2022 (Beterem Organization for Child Safety, 2022). The death of a child is one of the most severe forms of loss (Jaaniste et al., 2017; Lykke et al., 2019). Bereaved mothers are at high risk of intense grief, as well as psychological and functional distress (Gold et al., 2018; Polita et al., 2020), particularly in the case of violent death (Lichtenthal et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2018) such as home accidents (Champion & Kilcullen, 2023).

Despite growing research in the field of bereavement, there is still limited understanding of the traumatic loss experience of mourners. Together with the need for developing preventive measures to reduce the death rate of children as a result of accidents of this type, it is also necessary to provide adequate mental support to these mourners following the death of their child (Koyanagi et al., 2017). A recent systematic review based on data from seven studies worldwide indicated a high frequency of complicated grief in the case of bereavement due to home accidents

(Champion & Kilcullen, 2023). Qualitative research on bereaved Brazilian mothers whose children died in home accidents revealed the mothers' sense of guilt, emptiness, constant pain, non-acceptance of the child's death, and the desire to keep the child alive (Bezerra et al., 2022).

An aspect that remains insufficiently explained is the experience of bereaved mothers' continuing bond with their deceased child. Empirical evidence on continuing bonds has been emerging, but it is still scarce in the case of the violent death of the child in culturally unique samples such as Arab Muslim mothers. Given the reported cultural differences in the experience of continuing bonds (Klass, 2006), and given the unique experiences of continuing bonds in the case of mothers and traumatic losses (Field & Filanosky, 2010; Testoni et al., 2020), the current research focused on a particular ethnic and religious minority group (Arab Muslim mothers) in Israel to capture the experience and the manifestations of continuing bonds with young children who died in home accidents.

Theoretical framework

Historically, theoretical frameworks of grief have regarded severing ties with the dead as an essential step in adapting to loss (Freud, 1917/1957). Klass et al. (1996) challenged this idea. Instead of

"disengagement" from the dead, they proposed reframing the connection with them.

Findings revealed that the death of a child is followed by a strong need for continuing bonds with the child (Leichtentritt & Mahat-Shamir, 2017; Mun & Ow, 2017; Testoni et al., 2020). Several forms of continuing bonds have been described, and research revealed that certain types of bonds may be more or less adaptive or maladaptive (Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Florczak & Lockie, 2019; Fraley & Shaver, 2016). Examples include visiting the grave of the deceased, feeling their presence, holding on to their memory, keeping their photographs or possessions, and talking to and about them (Klass & Steffen, 2017; Root & Exline, 2014).

For the most part, the various expressions of the continuing bonds with the deceased were grouped into two categories: internalized and externalized (Field et al., 2013). Internalized bonds contained the abstract internal representation of the deceased and were considered to be more adaptive than externalized bonds, which seek to maintain a physical connection with the deceased – more sensory-based, concrete expressions of CPs, for example, through illusions and hallucinations. Externalized bonds are considered non-adaptive and prevalent in early or violent loss (Currier et al., 2015; Field et al., 2013; Field & Filanosky, 2010).

Sekowski (2021) proposed an alternative approach to continuing bond dimensions, distinguishing between concrete and symbolic continuing bonds. Concrete continuing bonds include all expressions of externalized continuing bonds, in all their manifestations, from hallucinations and delusions involving the deceased to a general feeling that the deceased is present and internal conversations with the deceased. Prolonged concrete continuing bonds may reflect difficulty adjusting to the loss. By contrast, symbolic continuing bonds, including joyful memories and reminiscing with others, had a positive effect on grief outcomes (Sekowski, 2021).

Violent death and continuing bonds

Research reported that continuing bonds are subject to various factors, including the type of loss (Currier et al., 2015; Field et al., 2003). Although research findings are limited on continuing bonds in bereavement resulting from the loss of a young child in home accidents, the findings related to violent death in general are relevant to our study. Studies have found that in the wake of violent death, the bereaved tended to

develop a concrete type of external bond with the dead (Field et al., 2013; Field & Filanosky, 2010). The same was true for the bereaved who reported a high sense of responsibility for the death (Field & Filanosky, 2010). This may reflect a failure to contain the loss when bereaved people who are faced with violent death or blame themselves for the loss may be more motivated to avoid reminders of the dead, given the greater distress caused by such reminders (Field & Filanosky, 2010). Maintaining access to comforting memories of the child is a complex task when it is difficult to preserve the child's memory without simultaneously suffering the tragic memory of the death.

Religious beliefs and continuing bonds

Research findings showed that continuing bonds are subject to cultural influences (Khatib et al., 2020; Klass, 2006). One cultural aspect that has influenced the way the bereaved maintained bonds with the dead is religion (Evans et al., 2018; Hussein & Oyeboode, 2009). To the best of our knowledge, research findings on religious beliefs and continuing bonds in the case of violent death are limited. Some findings document religious expressions of continuing bonds in case of loss in general among Muslims in particular. For example, it has been suggested that for Muslims, this bond is maintained through prayers (Evans et al., 2018; Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2012), religious activities, and commandments, including charities and pilgrimages to Mecca in the name of the dead (Hussein & Oyeboode, 2009; Mohamed Hussin et al., 2018).

Added to the above religious expressions of continuing bonds is a belief in the future reunion with the dead child in heaven (Hedayat, 2006; Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2012). Death is perceived as a transition to eternal life, to the next world, as the soul leaves the body and returns to God (Winter, 2008). Young dead children who have not sinned because of their age go to heaven (Hedayat, 2006; Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2012), as will the parents, as a reward for their patience and the stability of their faith despite the crisis of their child's death (Hedayat, 2006; Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2012).

The present study is part of a larger research that examined the experience of bereaved Muslim mothers who lost a young child as a result of a home accident. This article focuses on the experience and manifestations of continuing bonds after the child's death, aiming to answer the following questions: (a) What manifestations of continuing bonds did the bereaved mothers experience? (b) How did mothers experience

the challenges of continuing bonds considering the traumatic circumstances of the loss? and (c) What was the role of religious belief in the continuing bond?

Methodology

Participants

The present work was a sub-study of a broader research on the bereavement experience following the loss of a child, started in 2018 as part of doctoral studies. Twenty-two Muslim Arab mothers whose young children died in a home accident were invited to participate in the study. Seven declined. Thus, the study is based on the analysis of data collected from interviews with 15 mothers. Table 1 presents the mothers' demographics.

All the participants were married when they lost their child. At the time the interviews took place, two of the women had divorced and one was widowed. The average age of the participants was 36.2 years, with a range of 28–46 years. Most of the mothers were housewives, and a few had academic education. Of the 15 children who died, 6 were males and 9 females, aged between 1 and 6 years at the time of the accident.

Participants were recruited through social service workers at welfare offices and treatment centers in Israel. All procedures 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). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Interviews

Data were collected over one year by the first author. Semi-structured in-depth interviews in Arabic were conducted with bereaved mothers 2 to 7 years after the loss. The interviews were conducted in the mothers' homes at their convenience. Each interview lasted about two hours and was completed in one sitting. Questions about continuing bonds made up one part of each interview that focused on the bereavement experience of the mothers. Example questions include: "Could you share with me memories of your child?" "Do you feel that you have a continuing bond with your child? In what ways?" "What religious beliefs are associated with this continuing bond?" and "How has the way your child died influenced your continuing bond with your child?" The general interview included

also questions about attributing meaning, such as: How do you understand your child's death? How do you think about yourself or perceive yourself since the death? Additional questions concerned the bereavement experience of the mothers in their social space, for example: "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 was 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 by the first author. The researchers were aware of the potential emotional challenges of the interviews. All mothers were informed about available emotional support. They were also given the phone number of the first author, and were free to withdraw from the process at any time. All the transcribed interviews were anonymous, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

Trustworthiness

We took several measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. A draft of the analysis was sent to the mothers by messenger apps to check the extent to which it reflected their experiences, after which the first author conducted a follow-up conversation with the mothers by phone (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity served as another way to increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Lowe & Prowse, 2001). The first author, who led the analysis of the findings, frequently reflected on her personal biases as she discussed the research with the second author (the post-doctoral supervisor) and wrote about how her culture and beliefs influenced the research process, as a result of her belonging to the same culture and religion as the interviewees.

Data analysis

We used a descriptive phenomenological approach, which was found suitable for achieving an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' subjective experiences and the meaning they attributed to them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), such as the bereavement experience and the continuing bond with the deceased (e.g., Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Steffen & Coyle, 2010). This approach enabled the researchers to identify relevant thematic categories related to the continuing bond with the dead child. The first round of analysis was

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 (years)
Fatma	32	Married	High school	Rural	Housewife	Female	2-years	TV fell on her	2
Halla	31	Married	High school	Rural	Housewife	Male	4-years	Fall from the window	2
Lila	39	Married	High school	Rural	Housewife	Female	3-years	A neighbor ran her over	5
Hajar	38	Married	High school	Rural	Housewife	Female	16-months	As a result of her falling down the stairs inside the home	4
Samira	34	Married	College	Rural	Teacher	Female	3-years	A relative ran her over in the driveway	4
Susan	36	Married	High school	Rural	Housewife	Female	5-years	A neighbor ran her over in the driveway	3.5
Lubna	45	Married	High school	Rural	Housewife	Male	2-years	He was left in a car without ventilation when he was in the care of a relative who forgot to take him out	7
Em Adal	40	Married	High school	Rural	Sanitation worker	Female	5-years	She was run over by a distant relative in the vehicle in which he used to drive her to and from school	2.5
Nasrin	33	Divorced	High school	Rural	Secretary	Female	6-years	Died in a house fire	6
Miriam	33	Married	College	Rural	Teacher	Male	6-years	A relative ran him over in the driveway	4
Hanan	28	Married	College	Rural	Teacher	Male	3-years	Fall from the window	3
Zinab	43	Widowed	High school	Rural	Housewife	Male	5-years	He was run over by a neighbor in front of the parents' home	4
Khula	46	Divorced	High school	Rural	Sanitation worker	Male	5-years	He suffocated inside a refrigerator when playing hide-and-go-seek with his cousins	5
Suhir	28	Married	High school	Rural	Housewife	Female	15 months	A neighbor ran her over in the driveway	5
Tahani	38	Married	College	Rural	Teacher	Female	6-years	A relative ran her over in the driveway	3

conducted by the first author, followed by subsequent rounds of analysis with the second author.

We identified relevant thematic categories in several steps. First, the first author studied the text of each interview several times to obtain an overall picture of the material as a whole (Shakedi, 2006). Second, in each interview, we identified units of meaning that described the mother's experience of with the dead child (Giorgi, 1997). Third, we organized the individual units of meaning into relevant general themes for each interview. Finally, we grouped the themes across the interviews by identifying recurring topics and comparing the various units of meaning based on criteria of internal consistency (themes formulated in accordance with key ideas) and external heterogeneity (clear differentiation between themes) (LeCompte & Preissle, 1994). The texts were translated into English, and checked by three native speakers of Arabic fluent in English.

Findings

The analysis revealed three themes: efforts to continue the physical bonds, challenges in the continuing bonds in cases of traumatic death, and belief in afterlife as the main element of the continuing bond. The bond with the dead child appeared as a resource in dealing with physical loss in the present world, therefore preserving this bond can be considered an essential need. In the face of the traumatic circumstances of death, the bond becomes a double-edged sword in the images, feelings, and thoughts it evokes. Religious beliefs have been found to shape the relationship and guide the meaning ascribed to it.

Efforts to continue the physical bonds

This theme had four subthemes: keeping reminders, ongoing bond by means of a new object, giving birth to a child of the same sex, and giving the same name to a new child.

Keeping reminders

Bereaved mothers tended to use concrete types of bonds as a resource in dealing with their physical loss in the present world. The mothers clung to everything related to the dead children to keep a connection with them. "Only I have the key" and "the box is only mine" were statements that emphasized the depth of the loss and the need to maintain a connection with the dead child. After the loss, Halla collected everything she could from her dead son's belongings,

stored them in a closet, and kept the key in a special place to which only she had access:

After the incident, I collected the clothes he wore at the time of his death ... I didn't put them in the laundry ... I also collected his shoes ... I didn't clean the dirt from them. I keep everything in a locked closet and only I have the key. I don't like anyone to see what's inside it. (Halla)

Suhir expressed the same idea:

Her clothes when she was run over are still with me, also the soap and brush they used when they washed her before the burial. Everything's in the box and I open it on her birthday memorial ... the box is only mine. (Suhir)

The lock of the hair of Hajar's daughter that fell onto her clothes during the hospitalization and had been kept by Hajar is another example of this survival need:

At the hospital, I noticed a lock of her hair that fell onto her clothes. I took it and kept it to this moment. I also kept the earrings that R. received as a gift and she didn't have time to wear them. I imagine R. with long curly hair, her face unchanged, only her hair became longer ... I look at the picture and add the earrings to her ears. Some time ago, one of the earrings was lost! You cannot believe how I felt. I ransacked the house to find it. I felt suffocated. I even tore up the sofa to look for it. (Hajar)

Ongoing bond by means of a new object

The mother's words also revealed an ongoing bond by means of a new object. Halla's son planted a tree in his kindergarten before he died. Halla continued to visit the kindergarten, cultivate the tree, and create favorable conditions for its continued growth. She saw her child's character come to life in kindergarten through the tree that continues to grow in the present world:

Two weeks before my son passed away, the council moved his kindergarten to another place, so his father and I decided to make a gift to the kindergarten. We bought a large lemon tree, and A. helped his father plant the tree ... A. left this world and the tree remained, and his pictures we took that day remain ... I still visit his kindergarten ... When I visit there I always ask her about the tree, if she still keeps it, if she still waters it (Halla).

Hajar, who lost her daughter, echoed the same idea: the flowers she planted near her daughter's grave continue to bloom and grow. She described their blooming with enthusiasm and a smile on her face. The visit to the cemetery was a ritual that allowed her to continue the connection with her dead daughter,

perceiving the care for the grave as a symbolic act of care for the child:

The cemetery is close, about a minute from here. I go there regularly, smell the soil of her grave ... I planted flowers that have already grown and reached this high ... [indicating the height with her hand and smiling enthusiastically] Now I want to plant more flowers. (Hajar)

Giving birth to a child of the same sex

Another concrete way of maintaining the bond was by giving birth to a child of the same sex and at times even giving the child the same name. Fatma described the moment she was informed of carrying a male fetus during her pregnancy after the loss of her daughter as a crisis point, as if her daughter had just died. She felt she had lost her daughter and was moving away from the possibility of achieving closeness to her through a same-sex infant: "When I was informed of a male fetus in my pregnancy after the loss of my daughter, I felt that she had just died, I cried a lot ... I felt like I was moving away from her." Nasrin continued the same idea, describing her need to cling to the external resemblance between her two daughters, the one who died and the one born after the loss, dismissing all comments that pointed to an outward difference between the two:

After the loss, I got pregnant and prayed for a female fetus ... I gave birth to a daughter who is very similar to my dead daughter. I didn't want to hear about any outward difference between the two. She is very similar to her, so I feel that M. lives with me. This is how I see M ... her movements, her smile, everything ... (Nasrin)

Giving the same name to the new child

Other mothers emphasized their need to continue the relationship by giving the same name to the child born to them afterward. The mothers appeared to need to hear the name as it continues to be called inside the home. Susan described the intense need for it, which was met with disagreement by her husband who believed that giving the same name was not the right decision. At the same time, Susan continued to cling to the same idea in the hope that it would come true at some point in life, if not through her children then perhaps through her grandchildren:

I had wanted to call my daughter P. by the same name as R ... I wanted to keep hearing her name called at home, to give me the feeling that she's here, but my husband refused. Maybe it will come true in the future through the granddaughter when my son grows up and gets married (Susan).

Three years later I got pregnant and gave birth to my last son ... I wanted the name B to continue to be called inside the home. At first, when I heard the name I had a hard feeling inside, but then I get used to it (Zinab).

Other bereaved mothers, however, saw an act of commemorating the dead child by not giving the same name to their newborn. This idea is illustrated by Lila who said "Even when I gave birth after the loss, I preferred that her name be only hers... There's no one to take the place of my dead daughter" and Hanan who said "The name of my dead son is his ... I didn't give the same name to my new son ... it's his and I want it to remain his."

In sum, as the data above show, the continuing bond with the dead child serves as a resource for dealing with physical loss in the present world. The mothers' fear of losing their connection with the dead child is manifested in their obsessive observance of the private rituals.

The continuing bond challenges in cases of traumatic death

Two subthemes were apparent within the theme of the continuing bond challenges in cases of traumatic death: the challenge of maintaining positive memories and the complexity of conversing with the dead child.

The challenge of maintaining positive memories

The bond with the dead child is described as a double-edged sword that comforts and torments at the same time because of the violent circumstances of the loss, challenging the ability to maintain the connection through positive memories without being overwhelmed by memories of the last moments of the child's life:

I got to the point where the thoughts drove me crazy, like an explosion in my head ... I actually remember it every day, in every corner of the house, wherever I sit or look. Sometimes I try to forget ... actually not to forget my son because I actually want to remember him, but not to think the thoughts about the event. It's true that every death is difficult ... but it's possible that my suffering would have been less difficult if I had only heard that my son was dead and didn't see it myself (Khula).

It's awful! Maybe if I didn't see how she died my coping would have been easier ... It won't let me forget ... everything floats even when I try to remember the positive memories we had. Everything mixes together and it's very difficult. (Suhir)

Death as a result of burns that distort the outward appearance is a severe death because of the difficulty maintaining the bond with the child after death. The

distorted appearance disrupts the ability to recall the beautiful image of the child:

Following the fire, M.'s appearance changed greatly ... [description of her appearance during the period of hospitalization] When M. was hospitalized, I came home and collected all her pictures, I was afraid I'll forget how she looked ... [bursts into prolonged crying] After her death things became complicated. When I try to remember her, everything becomes mixed up, it's hard to block out the horrible pictures. (Nasrin)

The external appearance of the body at the funeral is mentioned in Suhir's discourse as a comforting factor in the mourning process and in connection with her daughter afterward:

The heart, the liver, the lungs, everything was torn ... [description of the internal condition after the accident] but thank God, her appearance was as beautiful as that of an angel ... What hurt me most was a small mark on her face. I want to remember her as beautiful as she was. (Suhir)

The complexity of conversing with the dead child

The dialectic in the emotions that accompany the continuing bond is also reflected in the dialogue conducted with the child. Mothers who lost their child in a home accident describe the ongoing dialogue they conduct with the image of the dead child, which on one hand tries to free their soul from the great pain they are experiencing and on the other it yet again imprisons them in self-blame. An illustration of this was expressed by Fatma, who said "It's hard for me to look at her eyes ... (talking to the picture). What can I tell her? ... It's very hard ... Will she forgive me? Maybe I should have taken better care. The same idea is expressed by Samira:

When I sit alone I look at this picture [huge picture], I feel that he has words to say to me. I see this in his eyes. Sometimes I feel like he wants to say: "Stop crying, I love you, I feel good where I am," and sometimes I feel like he wants to say: "Why did you leave me, why did you neglect me?" (Samira)

In sum, the second theme emphasizes the difficulty of maintaining the bond with the dead child without dealing with the traumatic images and strong feelings associated with the circumstances of death. Distortion in the appearance of the body and the mother's guilt are important components of this bond.

Belief in afterlife as the main element of the continuing bond

Mothers have expressed the belief in afterlife as the main element of the continuing bond through three

subthemes: dreaming of the deceased, reunion with the dead child in heaven, and engaging in actions that benefit the deceased.

Dreaming of the deceased

Bereaved mothers rely on religious belief in afterlife in their attempt to establish the continuing bond and the meanings they attach to it. For example, dreaming was referred to by mothers as a space for a reunion with the dead child, and in dreams, the dead child appeared to tell what was happening to him in the next world. They received messages, for example, that the state of the soul was good and positive, but at times negative. When the child appeared happy, the message received was positive; by contrast, when the child appeared sad, crying, and lonely, the message was negative:

Once my aunt came and shared with me that she dreamed that M. was standing in a corner crying in heaven; that all the children were playing and were happy except her... that she was unable to continue living there because I continue to cry over her and don't accept her death... and that doesn't let her say goodbye in peace, because my pain torments her. Since then I've been trying to hold back, I want her to be happy... Thank God, my sister and brother dreamed and saw her smiling (Nasrin).

My heart's desire is to dream about her, to see her at the age of her death... In dreams, I see her as an adult girl, as if she were alive... She appears with my dead father for seconds and then they go together. I cannot talk to her, but my father is talking to me. Every time I ask him to stay so that I can talk to her, but he tells me "We have to go..." Despite all my pain, I try to control my reaction for my daughter's sake... I don't want to torment her. The intense crying will torment her. (Suhir)

The inability of the soul of the dead child to rest in the next world illustrates the difficulty of the bereaved mother to accept the fact of the child's death. Through the appearance of the dead child in her dreams, the bereaved mother learns to come to terms with her death and release her to her new world:

I haven't seen her since... I long to see her in a dream... My mother tells me that if I continue to cry like this I won't see her in a dream because my sadness makes her sad... I want to see her just a little... I didn't see her when she died... Everyone saw her at the medical center and I didn't... I pray to God to let me see her in a dream, I long to see her how she's now, what she does, whether she changed or remained as she was. (Em Adal)

Mothers believed that their unbridled crying over their dead children tormented them and did not let

their souls separate. Restrained crying can be seen as a maternal function derived from this religious belief. Mothers related that they continued to care for their children even in their lives in the next world, in heaven. Avoiding visiting the cemetery, as Miriam explained, stemmed from the same belief: it was not to torment her son, especially because she could not control her emotional response to this exposure:

I would visit him a lot in the cemetery... I would visit and not stop crying over his grave and I was told that this is how I torment him. So he will be hurt by my pain and not rest in his place. So I no longer visit so as not to cry. I cannot control my reaction over his grave and don't want to torment him... Even on holidays, I don't visit, so he will rest more, and really before that I would see him in a dream in a bad condition. (Miriam)

Reunion with the dead child in heaven

Mothers who believe in afterlife wait for a reunion with their children in heaven and therefore try not to deny God. As reflected in Suhir's and Hagar words, for the purpose of the reunion, the mothers try to be patient and accept the loss. For example, Hajar said "Sometimes I think of my death as an encounter with R., that we meet again in heaven... I try to be patient and wait for that day." Suhir's belief in the next world prevented her from committing suicide after the loss of her daughter out of a desire for a reunion with her in heaven:

After the death of my daughter, I wanted to commit suicide, but I didn't want to deny God because then I wouldn't meet her. One day I'll meet her... This is not our life to decide when to end it. We must live to the time allotted to us by God. (Suhir)

As noted, faith guides the perception of loss as a kind of test of the patience of believers. As a reward for patient response to the loss of a baby, there is the belief that the dead baby may help the parents on Judgment Day. Tahani said "Despite the immense pain I try to be patient... Maybe God wants to test my patience; will I remain a believer despite what has befallen me... the loss of my son" and Halla said "Maybe God wants to test our patience. Life is supposed to go on despite what happened... It is said that on Judgment Day the baby will not enter heaven without taking his father and mother along."

Engaging in actions that benefit the deceased

Finally, donations in the dead child's name are another religious act considered by the mother as helping her continue caring for her child despite death. Em Adal said "In remembrance of her birthday,

my husband made a donation in her name... This made us feel good because we did something good instead of her in this world that helped her in the next one” and Lubna said “We like to donate in the name of our daughter... It makes us feel better... that we’re doing something good for ourselves and for her.”

In sum, we have shown how religious belief in the next world shapes the continuing bond with the dead child. Mothers continued to care for their children even in the next world, in heaven.

Discussion

Based on continuing bonds theory, this research examined the experience and manifestations of continuing bonds among bereaved Muslim mothers after their child died in a home accident. Our analysis identified three themes that characterized the mothers’ experience of continuing bonds with their dead child: efforts to continue the physical bonds, challenges in the continuing bond in cases of traumatic death, and belief in afterlife as a main element of the continuing bond.

In keeping with previous findings about bereaved mothers from different backgrounds, our study indicated an intense need for mothers to maintain the bond with their dead child (Leichtentritt & Mahat-Shamir, 2017; Mun & Ow, 2017; Testoni et al., 2020). Based on Sekowski’s (2021) concrete type of bond, the first theme revealed its widespread currency in feelings of the physical presence of the dead children perpetuated by keeping reminders, referring to new objects, giving birth to a child of the same sex, and giving the same name to a new child—all of which appeared to serve as an essential need. These different types of coping strategies are key aspects of grief and have emerged in studies related to bereavement as a concrete and physical way for mothers to feel closer to their dead child (Bezerra et al., 2022). As our findings show, after the loss, the mothers collected everything they could find of their dead child’s belongings, stored them in a closet, and most of them kept the key in a special place only they had access to. Although these belongings simultaneously created intense suffering in the mothers by remembering the time when the child was alive, the accident, and the moment of death, the mothers reported being unwilling to get rid of them.

As noted, the mothers also reported the need for concrete reminders by giving birth to a same-sex child, at times even by giving the name of the dead

child to the newborn. Naming newborn children after the dead ones has been observed in other cultures. A previous study on a sample of Australian Aboriginal cultures cited that the rationale for giving the name of the deceased child to another one born in the family is to ensure that the deceased is remembered (McGrath & Phillips, 2008). A study on bereavement in the Finnish countryside, spanning the period between the 18th to the mid-20th century, examined how the memory of a deceased person continued to live on in the names of those born later in the family (Kotilainen, 2012). The name, as the only concrete thing left of the dead child, embodied a memory of the dead child, who could in this way continue to live symbolically through a namesake sibling. This custom survived until the middle of the 20th century, when giving inherited names declined considerably.

Two subthemes were part of the second theme of continuing bond challenges in cases of traumatic death: the challenge of maintaining positive memories and the complexity of conversing with the dead child. Although the present study did not address the participants’ degree of adaptation, it indicated that mothers experienced great distress. Preserving mothers’ access to comforting memories of their children emerged as a complex task because of the tragic nature of the deaths. This may be explained by the difficulty processing and containing this type of traumatic loss (Ismail, 2022), which has been found to complicate the mourning process because of the need to integrate traumatic memories and images of the loved one (Liu & Field, 2022; Neimeyer, 2006). This may explain the use of concrete rather than symbolic expressions in this type of loss (e.g., Boelen et al., 2006; Field et al., 2013), as the present study also reveals.

The mothers experienced contradictory emotions during conversations with the dead child, which evoked feelings of guilt about the accident. Guilt has been found to make the relationship threatening (Root & Exline, 2014). The threat was reflected in the mothers’ descriptions of their imagined meeting with their dead child and in the conversations they had with the child through the child’s pictures. At the same time, these conversations paved the way for forgiveness and peace by comforting and guilt-reducing words that the mother imagined her child to be saying to her.

Peace was achieved also by the religious manifestations of the bond. In keeping with previous findings on Muslims (Hussein & Oyebode, 2009; Suhail et al., 2011), our results indicate that religion played a significant role in maintaining the bond with the

deceased. This bond is manifest mainly in the belief in afterlife, where the soul moves to eternal life in heaven (Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2012), especially in the case of a child who died without sin (Giladi, 1990). In the present study, the mothers expressed the theme of belief in afterlife through three subthemes: dreaming of the deceased, reunion with the dead child in heaven, and carrying out actions to benefit the deceased. Mothers treated dreams in which the dead children appeared to be happy in heaven as positive messages about their continued living there. They also described how negative visitations in their dreams guided their coping with the loss. The inability of the soul of the dead child to rest in the next world illustrated the difficulty of the mothers to accept the death of their children. In response, the mothers made efforts to comfort the dead children by exercising restraint in their mourning. Dreams of the deceased child had deep cultural meaning and were considered key indicators of the spiritual status of the deceased (Hinton et al., 2013). A previous study has reported that bereaved Muslims believed that in dreams the soul of the deceased appeared to convey messages about his future in the afterlife (Suhail et al., 2011). In this way, the bereaved reconnected with the deceased, and despite a lingering sadness of the loss, dreams of the future of their dead child brought them some comfort (Kim et al., 2021).

Although bereaved mothers were no longer the mothers of a live child in the present world, they continued to be mothers to a live child in the heavenly afterlife and continued to care for the child's wellbeing there. This was reflected in the mothers' interpretation of the messages they received in dreams and in the charitable donations they made for the benefit of the dead child's soul. This is consistent with a phenomenological study on Brazilian mothers, whose children also died in home accidents, and where mothers reported the need to keep caring for their dead child by various means, such as taking care of the child at the funeral and the burial (Bezerra et al., 2022). The mothers also believed in the future reunion with the dead child in heaven and in God compensating the believers (mothers) who kept their faith in God despite death by admitting them to heaven (Hedayat, 2006; Kristiansen & Sheikh, 2012).

Limitations and conclusions

Because the study was part of a larger research, the data on which the results are based were derived from a portion of the general interviews; therefore, more evidence is needed to substantiate our findings. Further, the sample size was quite small. We

interviewed only 15 mothers, and most of them came from similar socio-demographic backgrounds (most of them were homemakers and only a few had higher education), which limited the diversity of the sample. Moreover, the data were collected at one time point. A longitudinal study may have provided a broader picture of the development of this bond over time. Furthermore, fathers were not represented in the study or in previous ones based on Muslim samples. Because of gender roles and expectations (Yasien-Esmael & Rubin, 2005), gender is likely to affect the formation of continuing bonds, therefore it would be instructive to see how fathers' continuing bonds resemble or differ from those of the mothers. Future studies would also benefit from longitudinal design and a more heterogeneous group of participants, as well as from a quantitative examination of the effect of continuing bonds after the traumatic loss of a young child in a home accident on the bereaved mothers' mental health and adjustment.

The study makes several contributions. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first attempt to understand the phenomenology of continuing bonds in relation to Arab Muslim mothers in Israel. The phenomenological method helped to explore the richness of the mothers' experiences of this bond. Our findings highlight the role of violent circumstances and religious beliefs in the nature of continuing bonds. Concerning the violent circumstances of death due to home accidents, it is therapeutically important to focus on the challenge and complexity that mothers face maintaining positive memories and conversing with their dead children. Processing the symptoms and feelings of guilt associated with the trauma may allow access to the resource of continuing bonds with the dead child in a less threatening way.

The study showed that dreams form an important communication channel with the dead child, which should be given special consideration in the therapeutic relationship. The role of the meaning attributed to the dream must also be taken into account, which may bring comfort to mothers even if children died what is referred to as a "bad death." Under such circumstances, dreams emerged as an important means of ensuring a good future existence of the dead child, which may ease the mother's difficult feelings related to the child's suffering. Future studies should include a follow-up interview with mothers who had negative visitation dreams about how they coped in the wake of such dreams. Follow-up interviews may provide answers to questions about coping with violent loss by religious practice.

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Ethical approval

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Data availability statement

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