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## Observations from conducting a sensitive interview study about youth deaths

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### ABSTRACT

Young people's deaths from drugs, violence, or suicide comprise a sensitive topic that is challenging to study. This paper presents observations and experiences when aiming to reach a comprehensive and profound knowledge of the life trajectories of deceased youths by conducting and analyzing interviews. While collecting qualitative data regarding social phenomena is always contextual and situated, this kind of extreme topic gives rise to many extra nuances that affect the data. The skewness of the study informants, the emotionally charged interview accounts, and the secondary nature of other people's interpretations of the deceased's life require a considered approach. Different perspectives on death can never be set along the same line, as the social dynamics and personal histories with the deceased are diverse. Acquiring homogeneous data is an impossible task. These are aspects that researchers should carefully reflect upon during the research process.

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Interview; drug death; homicide; suicide; youth

## Introduction

Qualitative interviews provide an important supplement of knowledge for understanding the complexity of events leading up to death. Within different research traditions, the causes of and pathways to premature death have been approached by means of various forms of autopsies, beginning with the traditional medical autopsy, sometimes conducted in verbal form, especially in areas without adequate death registration (Gelband, 2022). Medical autopsies have been followed by psychological autopsies (Cavanagh et al., 2003). In the field of social sciences, sociological autopsies (Fincham et al., 2011) and social autopsies (Timmermans & Prickett, 2023) are oriented toward the social conditions that shaped the living environments of the deceased. These various kinds of autopsies represent methodologically different angles on death, producing different information regarding the circumstances of and pathways to death.

In this paper, we aim to capture our observations when forming our overall conception of the nature of the knowledge produced by sensitive interview data about youth deaths. Previous social research has approached death, dying, and bereavement from

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various angles, including emotions attached to bereavement (LaBlanc et al., 2020), the emotions and subjectivity of the researcher conducting death studies (Visser, 2017; Woodthorpe, 2007), and the ethics of bereavement interviews (Parkes, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1995). Many studies have addressed grief experiences specifically from the family perspective (Rosenblatt, 1995; Nadeau, 1998; Titlestad et al., 2021; Meen et al., 2025).

However, deaths occurring due to different causes under different circumstances affect how they are experienced and the types of meanings attached to them. Our paper covers the aforementioned aspects of previous death studies, placing specific emphasis on the deaths of young people who died under drastic circumstances, such as a drug overdose, violence, or suicide. We believe that the deep sense of injustice related to the loss of these young lives, which could have been prevented, leaves a distinct impact on how they are reasoned in interviews.

As Melville and Hincks (2016) note, conducting sensitive interviews requires protecting respondents through ethical guidelines, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality, as well as considering reciprocity and looking after the emotional well-being of both the interviewees and the researchers. To follow up on these notions, we feel that sharing our observations and experiences of the challenges in reaching and interpreting the data about dramatic youth deaths has the potential to offer something useful for other qualitative researchers.

## Data and methodology

The data set under exploration is part of a larger Young Despair research project, which aims to find solutions for breaking the pathways leading to violent, suicidal, and drug-induced deaths among young people under the age of 30 in Finland. Following Timmermans and Prickett's (2023) definition of social autopsy, the study aims to critically examine those outward social, political, and structural contexts that put some youths at higher risk of death than others. According to social autopsy conceptualization, the premature death of these youths is socially patterned. Covering the various living environments incorporated in the social autopsy method, the life trajectories of youth from childhood to early adulthood within institutional, cultural, and social domains were operationalized into interview questions. In total, the interview data comprised approximately 100 semi-structured interviews with family members of young people who had died from drugs, violence, or suicide; young people who had near-miss experiences; and professionals from social, healthcare, and control agencies who work with children and young people at risk.

The professionals were recruited through different social, healthcare, and law enforcement institutions after research permits were granted by the organizations in question. In practice, this meant that we either approached these institutions, that in turn decided whether to participate in our research, and chose the interview participants, or we contacted professionals directly. They either accepted the invitation or suggested a colleague. Youths having attempted suicide or experienced a drug overdose were recruited within treatment programs, while youths who had experienced a violent near-miss situation were reached through an NGO specializing in violence prevention. The personnel made an evaluation of which volunteers would be suitable

for being interviewed, and informed them about the research, after which we contacted them. The family members of the deceased youths were reached via NGOs that provide peer support for bereaving people. In these cases, our research information was disseminated in these organizations' social media channels and the volunteers contacted us. Finnish legislation does not allow researchers to contact the close ones of the deceased through the coroner's inquest, thereby not leaving any other option to us.

Due to the small Finnish population and the small number of youth drug-related, violent, or suicidal deaths in general, the timeframe of the occurrence of death was set to five years. Different recruitment procedures imposed by legal and ethical conditions, as well as varying temporal distance from the death, naturally affected our sample.

The interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours and were conducted at different sites, such as treatment institutions, the interviewees' homes, public libraries, or cafés. While the purpose of this paper is to use preliminary hermeneutic reflection to make visible the values and premises underlying the knowledge produced by the data, further analyses are carried out using more systematic qualitative methods (content, narrative, or discourse analysis). The additional analyses pursue different research objectives, including risk factors, vulnerability, and social support, and other protective factors, with the overall aim of providing solutions for preventing premature youth deaths.

## **First impressions of the characteristics of the data**

When studying human experiences, the emotional, social, and cultural contexts in which the data are produced affect the content. Especially when studying death, the study informants are always somehow secondary. As the deceased's own accounts are missing, it is someone else's perception or interpretation, and that fact determines what kind of knowledge is eventually available and reachable. This kind of knowledge is always situated. Overall, interviews on the deaths of young people in tragic and hazardous circumstances involve further distinctive aspects and challenges, which we aim to delineate in the following sections.

First, skewed data can hardly be avoided. As always, when collecting interview data, some people have greater eagerness and more mental resources to participate than others. In our study, people had lost their child or sibling to death or had been in a near-miss situation, which inevitably produces biases in the data. For us, as researchers, that required very careful preparation, such as training on how to approach and meet people in their grief and regular professional guidance in unpacking our own emotions during the interviews (see Melville & Hincks, 2016). Thus, we aimed to manage our critical distance (Woodsthorpe, 2010) or empathic distance (Rowling, 1999) as much as possible. This involved acknowledging that, as mortal human beings, we are always subjectively a part of our topic and, through that, become transparent by being conscious of the personal impact that the research may have on us and vice versa.

Second, perspectives on deaths are often filtered through a spectrum of emotional and defensive reactions, such as grief, anger, guilt, powerlessness, despair, or shame (LaBlanc et al., 2020), providing an intangible mixture of feelings that Titlestad et al. (2021) have named an emotional roller coaster. The interviewees might have different personal

agendas, such as criticizing the service system or assuring themselves that they did everything they could to ease their own despair.

Well, in middle school, the bigger challenges of course started. The seventh grade went somehow, but it was a really big school where he went. And I think the teacher was quite strict, and maybe didn't really understand these more active boys, that everyone had to fit into the same mould. (Parent)

Moreover, while our main purpose was not to study the grief experienced by the study informants, we had to be aware of the insights of bereavement scholars who address the patterns of grief (Okun & Nowinski, 2011), the tasks that the bereaved must accomplish to process the death of a loved one (Worden, 2018), and the continuing bond with the deceased that remains in mourners' memories (Klass et al., 1996). These dimensions might influence the ways in which the deceased's life is structured, while the meanings in the course of bereavement may be collectively constructed within the family context (Nadeau, 1998). Based on these notions, we needed to think carefully about how much we could eventually lean on what we were told in the interviews about the concrete life events of the deceased.

Third, the fragmentary nature of the interviews came out during the gathering process: None of our informants could report the whole life story of the deceased young person. For example, some parents stated that they do not know all the actions and life events of their child, especially after they have entered adulthood. In some parts of the interviews, the close ones were just guessing and assuming what might have happened and what kinds of thoughts might have been in the victim's mind.

Q: What about people close to them? Did anything happen with drugs, like friends who also used—were there any close calls or people who passed away?

A: They didn't really talk about that, so I can't say for sure. I guess even if something did happen, they wouldn't have told me about it. (Parent)

In the same way, professionals who have treated (later deceased) youth only seldom know what has happened to them after their encounter. They usually meet young people only during quite narrow moments in their lives, attempting to help them at that point and then losing contact with them.

We acknowledge that we are only a temporary stop in their life and their family is the environment to which they return after they have entered adulthood. (Professional)

This was a challenge that we decided to resolve by involving as wide a selection as possible of different service providers that usually help children and young people.

### **More profound insights into the nature of the knowledge**

The analysis quite quickly revealed many further nuances in the data. It became clear that the grieving processes were very individual for several reasons, one of which was related to how much professional help the interviewees had sought and obtained for their crisis. This varied significantly in our data: Some of the interviewees had not sought any professional help, while others were exposed to it from the first moment they were faced with the incident. If the interview was carried out soon after the

death, the wording and interpretation of the crisis help seemed to leak into the interview account, as the informants were repeating things they had been told, for example, about not being guilty of the incident, in order to overcome their overwhelming tragedy. In the same way, the reasoning of youth with near-miss experiences might be affected by, for instance, the premises of the rehabilitation programs or therapies that they were participating in, or the stages of their own recovery processes.

When I started therapy, I began to perceive my childhood experiences in a certain way, and realized how they have affected my own mindset. (Youth)

As always, in retrospective interviews, memories tend to change over time. Human memory is an adaptive constructive process vulnerable to errors, such as transience, blocking, misattribution, or suggestion. These processes serve critical functions in coping in life and influence people's reasoning. (Schacter, 2022.) It is possible that our interviewees' memories became especially distorted because of sorrow and guilt. As the workers in the gatekeeper organizations reminded us, the family members might have unknowingly or knowingly viewed the victim only in a positive light, regardless of how badly they had behaved. For example, the violent behavior of one of the deceased was neutralized:

He fought a lot during his life, but it has always been that he wanted to protect people who meant a lot for him. (Sibling)

According to the workers in the field, this distortion can last for two years, until the close ones are able to see the victim in a more realistic light. Evidently, this kind of orientation was conveyed in the interviews as evaluations of how and why things had happened.

The different backgrounds of the deceased also affected how their deaths were approached in the interviews. For some, it seemed to be just a matter of time, especially in situations involving many earlier suicide attempts or a restless, hazardous lifestyle with heavy drug use and violence. For others, it was an incomprehensible incident that was impossible to understand. Thus, the readiness of the interviewees to handle the occurrence varied. Moreover, the different backgrounds of the interviewees themselves may also have been linked to their ways of talking about the death, including their personal characteristics, varying emotional resilience, and possible professional competences to make sense of their situation.

In addition, the interaction between the interviewees and interviewer resonated with observations on the interviewer – interviewee power imbalance (Enosh & Buchbinder, 2005). As such, separating the interviewer as an objective bystander was impossible and even unnecessary. At the beginning of the interviews, we informed participants that we approached the conversations as researchers rather than therapists. They acknowledged this distinction and, in turn, positioned themselves as key sources of information. Nevertheless, after the interview, many of them told us that they had still experienced it as empowering or purifying (see Rosenblatt, 1995). For some, especially professionals, it offered a chance to clarify their own work view. For family members, it eased their bereavement. Some burdening effects were also raised. For example, one youth felt overwhelmed after talking about their friends' drug deaths. Overall, as their major intention to participate in the study, the interviewees expressed their willingness to

contribute to knowledge production about a topic very important to them by sharing their own story.

If at least one destiny can be switched into a positive, I have accomplished my mission by talking about these things. (Parent)

Eventually, wider societal relations and structures affected how knowledge of the young people's premature deaths was conceived. These involved, among other factors, cultural parenting expectations in the family members' interviews and professional territories, different treatment or control practices, and paradigmatic differences in the professionals' approaches. As for the youths with near-miss experiences, the social and normative expectations for young people, for example, gendered norms, were set as a mirror in which they reflected their own failings and achievements.

My good friend was maybe the first male in whose company I have cried as an adult. Somehow, certain societal things like 'men don't cry' still affect me. (Youth)

These examples represented (usually silent) cultural codes of how youth should live, be raised, and be treated in a certain cultural context (e.g. Meen et al., 2025), which is reflected in the interview data.

## Conclusion

After conducting interviews about young people's premature deaths, we have very valuable data with the potential to provide rich and important information that cannot be obtained through other methods. The issues we have raised do not form any obstacles to reaching relevant new knowledge about a crucial topic that needs more research to develop better intervention and prevention strategies. We only need to acknowledge the diversity it entails and the situated conditions within which it is produced. They are aspects that should be reflected upon during the research process, and whose influence on the study outcomes should be noted.

Overall, a retrospective look at young people's premature deaths is always an individual meaning-making process in which the interviewee seeks to make sense of why it happened (Meen et al., 2025). This was the case even though the informants had decided to share their experiences for research purposes, and they were certainly mentally prepared to do so. As a kind of dual paradigm (Fincham et al., 2011), the substantial knowledge about the circumstances, events, and living environments of the deceased youth and the ways in which the retrospective accounts are constructed by the interviewees together produce the social context for the interpretations of what happened and why. This kind of approach adopts critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998) as its epistemological standpoint by suggesting that in the social world, the reality of youth deaths exists but can be understood only through human perceptions, constructions, and social structures.

To conclude, when collecting and applying sensitive interview data for studying youth deaths resulting from tragic incidences, such as suicide, drug overdose, or homicide, our recommendations concerning the methodological contributions are as follows:

- Emotions and personal histories drastically affect the data, which means that researchers need to clarify to what extent to focus on the emotional reactions or the matter under study, and comprehend the strong entanglement between these.
- Researchers should also accept that the aim of acquiring homogeneous data through uniform interviewee recruiting practices, instructions, and interview guides, while a good starting point, faces limitations due to the interviewees' diverse reactions and meaning-making processes when faced by these overwhelming tragedies.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Kati Kataja**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Iina Sahramäki**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Sanna Rönkä**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Research ethics

The study protocol was approved on 19 September 2023 by the Ethical Committee of Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (no. THL/4486/6.02.01/2023).

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