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International university students' grief experiences in childhood

A replication study

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<p>Grounded in theories of grief and cultural psychology, this thesis aimed to explore how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds recount experiences of grief in earlier life stages. Two research questions were formulated: (1) How do individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds recount their earlier life experiences of grief? and (2) In what ways do individuals from different cultural backgrounds cope with earlier life expressions of grief? Hypotheses suggested that adults from diverse cultural backgrounds would recount varied expressions and experiences of grief, influenced by socio-cultural factors, and that these experiences would validate and extend findings from previous studies. This study aimed to fill the gap in the literature by examining how socio-cultural contexts shape grief experiences.</p> <p>The study, adopting a replication design based on Brinkmann (2020), collected narratives from 20 international master's degree students at the University of Helsinki via an online questionnaire. The questionnaire solicited participants' experiences of grief in childhood, emphasizing circumstances and emotional aspects. Ethical standards were upheld, ensuring participant anonymity, voluntary participation, and informed consent.</p> <p>Analysis revealed diverse triggers for childhood grief, including death, divorce, parental separation, social exclusion, and migration. Emotionally, grief often accompanied sadness and was expressed through crying, with cultural and religious beliefs shaping coping mechanisms and rituals. The taboo surrounding death and societal pressure to maintain childhood happiness emerged as prominent themes.</p> <p>In conclusion, findings supported the hypotheses, highlighting the variability of grief experiences across cultures and the influence of socio-cultural context. Understanding these nuances is particularly relevant in the educational field, as it can inform culturally sensitive interventions and support systems. Recognizing and addressing the diverse ways children experience and express grief, and understanding how they learn to cope with it, can help educators and school counselors provide more effective and empathetic support, ultimately promoting the well-being of children experiencing grief across diverse cultural backgrounds. This study underscores the critical role of education in shaping responsive and inclusive environments for grieving students.</p>		
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Tiivistelmä - Referat - Abstract <p>Juurtuneena surun ja kulttuuripsykologian teorioihin tämän väitöskirjan tavoitteena on tutkia, miten erilaisista kulttuuritaustoista olevat yksilöt kertovat surukokemuksistaan varhaisemmissa elämänvaiheissa. Kaksi tutkimuskysymystä muotoiltiin: (1) Miten erilaisista kulttuuritaustoista olevat yksilöt kertovat surukokemuksistaan varhaisemmissa elämänsä vaiheissa? ja (2) Miten varhaisempien elämäkokemusten suru ilmenee erilaisista kulttuuritaustoista tulevilla yksilöillä? Hypoteesit ehdottivat, että erilaisista kulttuuritaustoista olevat aikuiset kertoisivat monipuolisista surun ilmenemismuodoista ja -kokemuksista, jotka olisivat vaikuttaneita sosiaalikultuurisista tekijöistä, ja että nämä kokemukset vahvistaisivat ja laajentaisivat aiempien tutkimusten tuloksia.</p> <p>Tutkimus, joka omaksui replikointisuunnittelun, keräsi kertomuksia 20 kansainväliseltä maisteriopiskelijalta Helsingin yliopistossa verkkokyselylomakkeen avulla. Kyselyssä vastaajia pyydettiin kertomaan heidän lapsuuden surukokemuksistaan, korostaen tilanteita ja emotionaalisia näkökohtia. Eettisiä standardeja noudatettiin, varmistaen osallistujien anonymiteetin, vapaaehtoisen osallistumisen ja informoidun suostumuksen.</p> <p>Analyysi paljasti monenlaisia laukaisevia tekijöitä lapsuuden surulle, kuten kuolema, avioero, vanhempien ero, sosiaalinen syrjäytyminen ja muutto. Tunteellisesti suru liittyi usein surullisuuteen ja sitä ilmaistiin itkemällä, ja kulttuuriset ja uskonnolliset uskomukset muokkasivat selviytymismekanismia ja rituaaleja. Kuoleman ympärillä vallitseva tabu ja yhteiskunnallinen paine ylläpitää lapsuuden onnellisuutta nousivat esiin merkittävänä teemoina.</p> <p>Johtopäätöksenä tutkimustulokset tukivat hypoteeseja ja toivat esiin surukokemusten vaihtelevuuden eri kulttuureissa sekä sosio-kulttuurisen kontekstin vaikutuksen. Näiden nyanssien ymmärtäminen on erityisen merkittävää koulutuslalla, sillä se voi auttaa luomaan kulttuurisesti herkkiä interventioita ja tukijärjestelmiä. Tunnistamalla ja käsittelemällä erilaisia tapoja, joilla lapset kokevat ja ilmaisevat surua, sekä ymmärtämällä, miten he oppivat selviytymään siitä, voivat opettajat ja koulukuraattorit tarjota tehokkaampaa ja empaattisempaa tukea, mikä lopulta edistää surua kokevien lasten hyvinvointia eri kulttuuritaustoista. Tämä tutkimus korostaa koulutuksen kriittistä roolia reagoivien ja osallistavien ympäristöjen luomisessa sureville oppilaille.</p>		
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1. INTRODUCTION

Grief is a big part of being human. It is a universal experience that transcends cultural backgrounds, age, and other demographic factors, affecting each of us at various stages and moments of our lives. In Leeat Granek's (2013:278) words, grief can be understood as "an affective thread that moves across societies, institutions, communities, and relationships". Given this, it is clear that something impacting every human being must be fully understood, making its investigation necessary. Considering that grief is a universal experience, it is essential to study it thoroughly from various perspectives. It is particularly important to examine it from the viewpoint of childhood within diverse cultural contexts to understand how children learn to grieve. This is crucial because there hasn't been enough research on how these two aspects, both childhood and multiculturalism, intersect in the study of grief. As I will explain in the next section, numerous studies focus on what to do when a child experiences grief or how to support them when a loved one dies (Abrams, 2013; Bergman, et al., 2017; Buxbaum & Brant, 2001; Worden, 1996). However, just a few studies investigate how children process grief, how they learn to grieve (Brinkmann, 2019a; Quinones Goytortua et al., 2021), and the societal perspectives on it (Brinkmann, 2018).

Same as adults, children also experience grief in their everyday lives through various losses such as the death of a person or a pet, the departure of a friend, or the loss of a cherished possession (James et al., 2001). These experiences contribute to children's comprehension of loss, resilience, and emotional understanding from an early age. The benefits of children experiencing grief and developing comprehension include early resilience building, fostering emotional intelligence, and promoting empathy and coping skills from a young age, contributing to their overall emotional development.

The grieving process in children is multifaceted and can evoke emotions like emptiness, anger, confusion, abandonment, and insecurity. Moreover, children often experience feelings of responsibility and guilt regarding the loss they have suffered (Wilson, 2009). These feelings of responsibility and particularly guilt often accompany moments following a loss when children realize they are not experiencing or expressing the appropriate emotions, such as sadness, that should be felt in that certain situation.

From the perspective of education, understanding how children learn to grieve is crucial for providing effective support during their first years of schooling. Teachers, alongside the broader educational community, play a significant role in establishing a safe environment where children can express their emotions and address loss. As mentioned by Lipponen and Pursi (2022), early childhood education serves as a crucial setting for children to experience and manage grief. They also argue that in the learning community, it is important to let children express their thoughts and feelings freely. Children should be helped to understand and handle their emotions. Staff should watch what children do, listen to how they feel, and create a safe place where everyone can share how they feel.

According to Osterweis et al. (1984), those who interact with children who have recently experienced loss often observe a mix of emotions like sorrow, anger, and anxiety. These kids might display changes in behaviour such as disruptions in eating and sleeping patterns, withdrawing from activities, struggling to focus, seeking more support, reverting to earlier behaviours, feeling restless, and experiencing difficulties in learning. The specific symptoms can vary based on the child's age at the time of the loss. For example, younger children under five may exhibit disruptions in eating, sleeping, and toileting routines, while those under two might lose their ability to speak or show general distress. School-age children might develop fears, become excessively preoccupied with their health, withdraw from social interactions, or take on caregiving roles. In some instances, especially among boys who find it hard to express their feelings, aggression may manifest instead of overt sadness.

By recognizing that grief is socially constructed and learned, educators can understand the impact of grief on children's academic success, emotional well-being, and overall mental health (Eftoda, 2021). Exploring how children cope with grief is important in an educational context, as it helps teachers recognize when students are struggling and offer appropriate support. This includes ensuring grieving students feel understood and supported and helping them navigate their emotions effectively. Understanding how grief affects children's lives allows teachers to create a caring environment where every student feels valued and can thrive emotionally and academically (Morell-Velasco et al., 2020). Without this understanding, how can we accurately identify and provide the support they genuinely need?

The objective of this thesis is to delve into how grief experiences vary among individuals from different cultural backgrounds and how these differences influence the ways grief is expressed and coped with in early life stages. Without this understanding, we cannot accurately identify or provide the genuine support that children truly need. By recognizing and addressing the diverse ways children experience and learn to cope with grief, educators and school counselors can offer more effective and empathetic support, ultimately promoting the well-being of children facing grief across diverse cultural contexts.

The article conducted by Svend Brinkmann (2019a), "Learning to Grieve: A Preliminary Analysis", serves as an example of this, and will therefore serve as the foundation for this study. My research is a replication of Brinkmann's with a variation of the background of the participants who share their childhood experiences of grief. While Brinkmann analysed a more homogenous group of students, I investigate participants from a multicultural context.

The primary objective of this research is to expand our comprehension of how children experience the grieving process, particularly through the perspective of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, to understand the influence of socio-cultural factors around grief. By exploring the earlier life experiences shared by these individuals, this study aims to improve our understanding of grief at a young age. Through investigating narratives and perspectives from international participants, the research aims to uncover how socio-cultural factors intersect with childhood grief experiences. By diversifying the sample, (i.e., using experiences from people who do not belong to the same cultural context) this study aims to determine whether Brinkmann's findings hold across diverse cultural backgrounds.

The structure of the thesis is the following. It begins with an exploration of the theoretical background, starting with a comprehensive literature review that uncovers existing insights into childhood grief. It then delves into the theoretical framework established by Svend Brinkmann in his work, "Learning to Grieve: A Preliminary Analysis," providing first a detailed description of Brinkmann's original study. Then, the thesis describes the foundational concepts that underpin this study, providing a more comprehensive and detailed exploration through the insights of relevant literature.

Moving into the research and methodology section, I outline the thesis' research questions and hypotheses, followed by an explanation of the replication study design adapted from Brinkmann's research. This section explains the data collection methods, participants, the research approach employed, and the thematic analysis method utilized for data analysis.

In the results, interpretation, and discussion section, the thesis elaborates on the three main themes derived from participants' responses, contrasting them with the theoretical framework and comparing them to the original study conducted by Brinkmann.

Finally, the last section explores the implications of the findings for understanding grief in diverse environments and acknowledges the limitations of the replication study while proposing suggestions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Literature review

Before delving into the theoretical framework supporting this thesis, it is important to examine what has been studied about grief and how it has been studied, in order to understand why this research is necessary and significant.

Richard Gross (2016), in his book *Understanding Grief*, identifies the main sources of information about the nature of grief. Firstly, he mentions Freud's publication *Mourning and Melancholia* (1922), which has served as a significant influence for many authors who have contributed to the field of grief. Among them, notable figures include Bowlby and Parkes (1970) with their well-known stages of grief (shock-numbness, yearning-searching, disorganization-despair, and reorganization), and Kübler-Ross (1969) with her stages of dying (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance).

Gross (2016) notes that much of our understanding of grief stems from empirical studies involving large numbers of participants conducted by psychiatrists, aimed at comprehending how grief can lead to psychiatric disorders and, consequently, developing prevention or treatment programs. This is also in line with Bandini (2015) and Lund (2020) who argue that psychological and medical theories predominantly frame grief as an individual emotion and problem.

Furthermore, as emphasized by Lipponen and Pursi (2022:2), referencing various authors (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2013; Ener & Ray, 2017; Gross, 2016; Rando et al., 2012), “grief is a psychological response to any significant loss or trauma and has been explored mainly in relation to the death of close relatives.” Hence, research has mainly focused on studying grief from the perspective of relating it to the death of family members and from a psychological perspective.

Another source contributing to our understanding of grief is anthropological or ethnographic studies (Gross, 2016). These studies help identify patterns across different cultures. However, as criticized by Acher (1999), ethnographic sources have traditionally focused more on rituals and beliefs surrounding death rather than the psychological aspects of grief.

Lastly, Gross (2016) refers to personal narratives of bereaved individuals. These accounts offer firsthand insights into the experience of grief, explaining this from the

grievers' perspectives. According to the author, these accounts provide a more authentic understanding of grief compared to the other methods.

Focusing on childhood grief, Pursi et al. (2024) discuss how current studies on grief seldom emphasize young children's perspectives and their methods of understanding and expressing grief, excluding those that investigate loss related to death of a parent or sibling. Lipponen and Pursi (2022) express that recent studies in childhood development (Clark, 2005; James & Prout, 1990; Lipponen et al., 2016) have highlighted the significance of acknowledging the child's viewpoint on topics that are important to their experiences.

As concluded in their paper about children's grief, Lipponen, and Pursi (2022:18) state:

From the theoretical and methodological perspective, our study raises questions for further research. We know that repertoires of practices vary in different cultural communities: expressions of and responses to grief are dependent on sociocultural preferences, situational contexts, and individual lived experiences.

There are words from scholars researching grief highlight the need for further exploration into how cultural contexts influence expressions and responses to grief.

This literature review concludes that the topics of grief from a medical and psychological perspective, grief related to death, and beliefs surrounding death have been looked at. However, there is a gap in research regarding how children learn to grieve and the direct influence of societal norms and cultural contexts on their grieving process which includes death but could also encompass other reasons for grieving.

2.2 Understanding grief

This chapter aims to elaborate on the most relevant concepts in this study more in-depth by contrasting the definitions of different authors. The chapter is divided into 4 sections: grief as a variety of losses, grief as an emotion, grief as a normative phenomenon, and grief in childhood.

2.2.1 Grief as a variety of losses

This section describes how grief is not only a response to death, but to a variety of losses.

Although authors such as Herman (1974) and Somary & Emery (1991) addressed divorce as grief decades ago, studies like that of Klurfeld et al. (2020) explain how common role losses, such as divorce and job loss, have traditionally been overlooked as triggering events for grief. However, his findings provided evidence that role loss can indeed lead to grief.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald et al. (2021) address the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential repercussions, such as job loss, through the lens of grief. Similarly, Berinato (2020), discussing grief from a broader perspective, explains that we are collectively grieving due to the loss of normalcy, economic uncertainty, and the loss of connections. He argues that this type of shared grief, viewed from a more global perspective, is unfamiliar to us.

Additionally, there are modern concepts regarding grief, such as 'ecological grief', which denotes an emotional reaction to the disappearance of cherished environments, species, or ecosystems. This phenomenon is becoming a bigger problem for people's health and well-being (Benham & Hoerst, 2024).

Finally, in their publication, Pursi et al. (2024) also gather various studies that reference reasons for grief beyond death, such as the grief experienced by entrepreneurs following business failures (Jenkins et al., 2014), the passing of pets (Cordaro, 2012), displacement from homes and communities (Morrice, 2013) and the loss of peer relationships because of exclusion or loneliness (Lipponen & Pursi, 2022; Quiñones et al., 2021).

2.2.2 Grief as an emotion

Drawing from Brinkmann's (2019a) insights on grief as an emotion, grief has often been conceptualized as a psychological reaction, a concept generally analyzed through the reaction theory of emotions. Gross (2016:5) discusses grief as "a universal reaction to bereavement, involving both psychological and bodily experiences". This that grieving is not learned, and it is expected that everyone grieves in the same way, following the stages in an analogical manner. This perspective, however, contradicts the way Brinkmann understands grief, which is that grief is not just an emotion; it is also the result of socio-cultural influence.

The approach to the emotion of grief from which this thesis is analyzed is through the lenses of response theory, which can also be explained as the way humans respond to events in the world through emotions. This theory posits that emotions are automatic and involuntary reactions to external or internal stimuli. These responses include physiological changes, facial expressions, and behaviours that occur without conscious intervention. Additionally, Brinkmann (2019a) also explains how emotions are a way for humans to try to understand the world.

Monique Scheer's *Emotions: a kind of practice* (2012) introduces the concept of "emotional practices," suggesting that emotions are not just inner feelings but also practical engagements with the world. Individuals learn how to perceive, act, and feel within their cultural practices. Emotional practices serve as scaffolding to navigate experiences like bereavement. According to the response theory of grief, grief is an embodied, meaningful response, closely tied to cultural norms and practices. Emotions are best understood as connected to actions, reflecting how humans respond to situations (Brinkmann, 2019a).

Furthermore, crying is a way for children to express their emotions and understand the world around them. It reflects not only their own feelings but also the cultural norms and values they grow up with. When children are distressed or feel a loss, their tears show how they interpret relationships and societal expectations within the framework of their society (Brinkmann, 2019a; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018; Quiñones et al., 2022).

2.2.3 Grief as a normative phenomenon

According to Pursi et al., 2024, recent studies (Brinkmann, 2019b; Kofod & Brinkmann, 2018; Pulkkinen, 2017) show that grief is experienced, talked about, and processed differently by different people and cultures. How much you grieve can also change depending on when and where you are.

Even if grief is common in children's lives, Lipponen and Pursi (2022) argue that especially in Western cultures that value childhood happiness, there hasn't been much research on how children experience and show grief. Lipponen and Pursi (2022:1) state that: "When happiness becomes a goal, unhappiness is to be avoided, and we become increasingly reluctant to accept grief as part of our lives." Hence, in our current society

where happiness in childhood has become a “norm”, it is difficult to accept children’s grief.

Both cultural-historical approach (Gutierrez, 2002; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003), and cultural psychology-based studies on grief (Brinkmann, 2017; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018; Pulkkinen, 2017) agree on the connection between the personal experiences and cultural context (Lipponen & Pursi, 2022).

While there exists a universal experience of grief, the variations in grieving practices across cultures highlight the importance of studying cultural patterning to foster cross-cultural understanding and gain insights into one’s own grief reactions (Stroebe & Schüt, 1998). By acknowledging and exploring these diverse perspectives on grief, researchers and practitioners can contribute to a more holistic understanding of grief as a normative phenomenon. Grief is considered a normative phenomenon because it is a common and expected response to loss, shaped by cultural and social norms. Later, in section 2.3, it will be explained how Brinkmann demonstrates this phenomenon.

2.2.4 Grief in childhood

When aiming to understand grief as an emotion, the question arises of how this emotion is acquired. However, there is a lack of research addressing this question, particularly when it comes to children’s grief (Brinkmann, 2019a).

As Tracewski and Scarlett (2022) explain, in grief theories, a common thread is individuals processing the loss of a loved one. Children must comprehend death before embarking on their grief journey. However, there is a mistaken belief that children cannot understand loss and thus should be excluded from adult discussions about it (Contro et al., 2011).

Some individuals avoid discussing death with children because they are unsure how to initiate these conversations or due to fear of being confronted with questions they cannot answer (Riely, 2003; Corr, 2014; Doka, 2013). Nonetheless, neglecting to recognize a child’s grief denies them the opportunity to build a future where they can learn how to cope with grieving situations (Knight & Emanuel, 2011).

In line with this idea of adults’ thoughts on children’s grief, Lipponen and Pursi (2022:19) state:

We often estimate that children's grief is less than that of adults, and children's grief is more easily silenced. We must examine more carefully who has the right to grieve in our society, and whose voice in grief should be heard. Exploring children's grief constitutes one potential response to the polarization in contemporary society by increasing the opportunities for children to do, to be in formation with emotions and relationships.

In other words, there's often an assumption that children's grief is less significant than adults' grief, leading to their voices being silenced. It's essential to reconsider who has the right to grieve and whose voices should be acknowledged in grief.

By delving into the grief experienced by children, we can bridge societal gaps and facilitate their emotional growth and connections by helping them navigate their feelings and relationships. By exploring children's experiences of grief, we can bridge societal divides and promote their emotional growth and interpersonal connections through education. Socio-emotional learning (SEL) skills play a crucial role in this process, empowering children to recognize and manage their emotions adeptly. Through SEL, children can cultivate empathy for others coping with grief, fostering supportive relationships within their communities. This framework equips them with effective communication tools, enabling them to express their feelings and seek or provide support sensitively. Integrating discussions on grief within educational contexts facilitates environments where children feel understood and equipped to navigate loss positively, contributing to the development of resilient individuals and compassionate communities.

2.3 Learning to Grieve: A Preliminary Analysis by Svend Brinkmann

The theoretical framework upon which this study is based is the article published in 2019 by Svend Brinkmann titled "Learning to Grieve: A Preliminary Analysis". I have chosen this article as the theoretical framework for my replication study because its comprehensive methodology and significant findings provide a solid foundation for examining the consistency and reliability of its results in different contexts.

This study understands the concept of grief as a response to a variety of different losses (i.e., death of a person or animal, parents' divorce, social exclusion), unlike other studies on grief which focus on grief only on death or very traumatic events (Lipponen & Pursi, 2022).

The exploration of grief as a normative phenomenon highlights the socio-cultural dynamics and developmental aspects that are inherent in the grieving process.

Brinkmann's analysis demonstrates how individual grief experiences are influenced by the socio-cultural context, highlighting the universal yet culturally specific nature of grieving. It underlines the connection between both individual experiences and the socio-cultural environment in which these happen. He does this by “mentioning is the social scaffolding that socializes children into feeling grief in the right way” (Brinkmann, 2019:479).

His study offers valuable insights into the developmental perspective of learning to grieve, emphasizing the distinction between reaction and response theories of emotion. In contrast to reaction theories, which view emotions as instinctual, response theories propose that emotions are socially constructed and influenced by individual experiences and societal norms. Brinkmann's perspective aligns with the response theory, suggesting that grief is learned and expressed within the context of social and cultural influences, especially during childhood.

In short, Brinkmann's study highlights how social and cultural factors influence how we learn to grieve, especially in childhood. It shows that grief isn't just an individual experience but is shaped by society and early life encounters with loss, emphasizing the need for a broader understanding of emotional development and support systems around grief and grieving in childhood.

2.3.1 Description of the original study by Brinkmann

This section explains the process followed in the original study conducted by Brinkmann, which is replicated in this study.

Svend Brinkmann (2019a) conducted the study “*Learning to grieve: a preliminary analysis*” with the desire to move from theoretical understanding and personal observations to a more rigorous and comprehensive examination of how children learn to grieve. For that, he chose to gather stories from students at the University of Aalborg, Denmark, considering it a pilot study.

He invited approximately 150 first-year psychology students to participate in an online survey where they were asked to anonymously respond to a single question: “*Would you*

please write about an early experience of grief?" They were informed that the length and format of their response were entirely up to them, but it would be helpful if they included details about the situation and circumstances. Following this simple prompt, he received 50 responses of varying lengths and content, ranging from brief descriptions to detailed narratives of loss and mourning.

He analyzed all the accounts thematically, organizing them into categories derived from the material itself. His approach was influenced by theoretical perspectives on emotions based on cognitive and appraisal theories. In this regard, he aimed for what has been termed a "theoretical reading" of the materials, as described by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015).

Brinkmann (2019a) examined real-life examples to gain a better understanding of emotions without imposing them into a fixed framework. Later, he discussed three common themes he discovered, which were surprising compared to typical emotion theories. Still, he believed these themes could be explained by the response theory.

The themes revolved around a lack of understanding (not knowing how to grieve), the intertwining of grief with other emotions (especially guilt), and the concept of scaffolding (learning about the emotion through social processes).

Regarding the lack of understanding, Brinkmann (2019a) explains that many individuals initially experience this when faced with loss, feeling bewildered and unsure of how to respond. Examples include a person struggling to support grieving friends and a child crying over a grandparent's death without fully grasping its significance. The accounts illustrate that children often respond emotionally even without full comprehension and that they learn how to grieve by observing and imitating adults. This socialization process helps them gradually understand the norms and seriousness of grief.

When it comes to the second theme analysing by Brinkmann (2019a), he notes that feeling "wrong feelings" after a loss, such as guilt, is common. For example, a person felt guilty for not crying immediately after their great-grandmother's death at age 10. Similarly, another felt guilty for not grieving their grandfather's death at 14, instead feeling more sadness for their mother's grief. This guilt highlights the normative expectations of grief, suggesting that children learn these emotional norms as part of their grieving process. Another example involves a child feeling guiltier over their

guinea pig's death than their grandfather's, indicating an awareness of the normative expectations for different kinds of loss.

Lastly, a third aspect highlighted in the accounts is how social interactions scaffold children into experiencing grief in socially accepted ways. For instance, witnessing their father cry for the first time after their grandfather's death at age 7 deeply affected one individual, illustrating how children perceive and internalize grief through observing the emotional responses of others. The examples suggest that emotions, including grief, are learned and cultivated within specific cultural and social contexts. Additionally, rituals like maintaining diaries or visiting graves provide scaffolding material that helps children express and manage their grief, reinforcing the normative expectations surrounding loss and mourning.

Other aspects that surprised Brinkmann (2019a) included the significant number of students who had experienced the loss of a parent or sibling (which may be related to the large student population) and the revelation that many students recalled the early episode of loss as the first time they witnessed one of their parents cry. However, Brinkmann hasn't analyzed these themes yet, as those findings have not yet been published. Therefore, Brinkmann (2019a) recognized that his study should not be viewed as a complete interpretation of the accounts but rather as a preliminary illustrative analysis of three main themes that recurred in many of the accounts and were particularly relevant considering the theoretical points previously discussed in his article.

3. RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions and hypotheses

Research Question 1: How do individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds recount their earlier life experiences of grief?

Research Question 2: In what ways do individuals from different cultural backgrounds cope with and express grief from earlier life experiences?

Based on the theoretical background, I formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Adults from diverse cultural backgrounds will recount varied earlier life expressions and experiences of grief influenced by socio-cultural factors such as traditions, norms, and social contexts.

Hypothesis 2: The experiences and expressions of grief observed in individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds will both validate and extend the findings of Brinkmann's original study, highlighting the influence of socio-cultural diversity on the grieving process.

3.2 Replication study design

This section describes the methodological choices of this study, including the participants, data collection method, research approach, and analysis I used.

Furthermore, I describe in detail the process followed in the research.

The approach of this study involves conducting a replication study of Brinkmann (2019a) while altering the context and the participants. According to Nosek et al. (2022:723), “a replication refers to testing the reliability of a prior finding with different data”. These authors also support that the credibility of a scientific discovery relies partly on the ability to replicate the evidence that supports it (Nosek et al., 2022). Thus, by replicating the study, this research will help determining whether Brinkmann’s findings hold across diverse cultural backgrounds.

The original study was conducted in a homogeneous context in terms of the students' background, socio-cultural factors, and origin, as it exclusively involved Danish students. My study, in contrast, recollects the experiences of international students with multicultural backgrounds in a Finnish context.

The data were collected from narratives by international master's degree students (N=20) at the University of Helsinki. An international master's degree program was chosen as participants would represent a multicultural environment, the intended sample group for the aims of this research.

3.3 Data collection method: online questionnaire

For the data collection, the instructions from the original study (Brinkmann, 2019a) were followed. Thus, I developed a single-question online questionnaire: “*Would you please write about an early experience of grief?*”. The questionnaire also informed participants that the length and format of the description were up to them, but it would be nice if they could provide details on the circumstances of their grief. Google Forms platform was used to collect the narratives. This questionnaire was used to recollect the experience of grief in the past by giving voice to different individuals.

In the questionnaire, participants were also asked to acknowledge a consent form (Appendix 2) and a privacy notice (Appendix 1), both intended to ensure ethical conduct and inform them about their rights and data protection.

3.4 Ethics

In this study, ethical standards were essential for ensuring participant well-being. Comprehensive explanations regarding the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits were provided to participants through both a consent form and a privacy notice. It was emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, with participants retaining the right to withdraw at any time without facing consequences. Participants were assured that their identities would be anonymized in all reports and publications. These measures were implemented to safeguard participant privacy, foster trust, and preserve the integrity of the research.

3.5 Participants

To ensure the anonymity of the participants, specific questions about nationality were not included in the data collection process. However, it is important to note that the sample of 20 respondents represents a subset of a larger group of 122 students from 33

different nationalities. While direct information on nationality was not obtained, the diverse composition of the larger student population confirms the international background of the study. Despite the absence of explicit nationality data, the inclusion of participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds contributes to the multicultural nature of the research.

The questionnaire was sent and responded by students from different cohorts of the international Master's program, aiming to receive at least 25 responses. One of the potential participants personally shared that it was a very sensitive topic, and this made it impossible for some to participate.

A total of 20 responses were obtained.

3.6 Research approach incorporating deductive and inductive methods

The orientation to data coding can be approached from both deductive and inductive perspectives, as highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2021). Deductive coding involves applying predefined concepts or theories to analyze data, while inductive coding allows for themes and patterns to emerge directly from the data itself, without a predefined framework. This thesis employs both approaches, recognizing the benefits of each in comprehensively exploring the research questions. The following lines will detail how these dual approaches were applied to analyze and interpret the data, demonstrating their complementary roles in enriching the understanding of the study's findings.

Firstly, a deductive research approach has been used to analyze the data. As stated by Creswell and Clark (2007:23), the deductive researcher “works from the ‘top down’, from a theory to hypotheses to data to add to or contradict the theory”.

Considering that this study is a replication of another study, it adopts a deductive approach as it starts with established theories and hypotheses derived from previous research. In the words of Braun and Clarke (2021:53), “The orientation to the data is ‘more deductive’, where the analysis is shaped by existing theoretical constructs, which provide the ‘lens’ through which to read and code the data and develop themes”.

However, an inductive approach has also been used for the analysis. As explained by Thomas (2006), the main goal of the inductive approach is to let research discoveries come from the common, prominent, or important themes found in the raw data.

Sometimes, important themes can be hidden, changed, or not seen because of the assumptions in how data is collected and analyzed using deductive methods.

Thus, there are several reasons why a researcher might consider inductive research a good approach for analyzing data in a study focusing on grief as the main topic.

Firstly, inductive research is great for understanding complicated experiences like grief because it allows for exploration. Gathering stories helps find new perspectives, themes, and patterns that haven't been looked at before. Given that grief still lacks sufficient research from multiple perspectives (Lipponen & Pursi, 2022), this is a significant matter to consider.

Additionally, it allows for a holistic approach to understanding grief as an experience by examining emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects, as well as exploring the broader cultural and social context in which the grief is experienced. This is consistent with the approach to grief adopted in this research.

Finally, inductive research is participant-centred. This means that it prioritizes the participant's experience and perspective, which is particularly valuable for individuals who share childhood experiences related to grief. This last point is important considering that the manifestation and reaction to grief are contingent on individual lived experiences, situational contexts, and sociocultural norms (Lipponen & Pursi, 2022).

Therefore, it is considered that in order to analyze the narratives with the greatest depth possible, the use of both approaches was necessary, considering that they are not necessarily exclusive but one can combine elements of both to reach a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clark, 2021).

3.7 Data analysis method: thematic analysis

For the thematic analysis, this research is based on six phases of reflexive thematic analysis introduced and developed in the book *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The summarized phases are presented in the following table, derived from a previous publication by the same authors (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87).



Table 1 - Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarize yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: Braun & Clarke (2006:87).

Some of the phase names have been altered in the most recent publication. As an example of this, the authors explain the following:

We've renamed Phase four from our original reviewing themes, because, like phase three, we felt it risked evoking something other than what we mean here. The original name risked suggesting that by this time, you're not still actively developing themes, but are rather just checking to make sure they fit. (Braun & Clark, 2021:143)

However, this does not affect the process carried out in each phase.

Before delving into the detailed explanation of the phases of the process, it needs to be mentioned that the collected narratives were manually analyzed. They were printed for a better visual analysis and interactive engagement with their contents. Each narrative was segmented into distinct units, such as sentences or thematic sections, and manually analyzed for key themes and patterns. Detailed notes were reported alongside each segment, documenting keywords, thematic trends, and relevant contextual information. Through this examination, different codes were identified, enabling the organization of the data. This method of manual analysis helped with a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the narratives.

According to the guide, the first step was to *familiarize myself with the dataset*. Braun and Clarke (2021) outline three key practices for this phase: immersion in the data, critical engagement with the data, and note-making of thoughts related to the data set.

Thus, to accomplish this, I carefully read and understood the narratives, diving into the data, and reporting any interesting ideas that emerged.

When it comes to critically engaging with the data, “you stop just taking in the information, and start asking yourself deeper questions about the data [...], to develop potential patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2021:88). For that, following Braun and Clarke’s (2021) process for a better critical engagement with the data, some initial questions were formulated to be answered while the stories were being read (e.g., *how would I feel if I was in that situation? (Is this different from or similar to how the person feels, and why might that be?)*).

After the data was initially reviewed, it became evident that the responses were centered around particular topics, with multiple similarities among them. Consequently, the second phase of the process was initiated: *coding*.

Regarding the coding approach used to capture meaning, I primarily employed *semantic coding*. Despite being more descriptive, it is participant-driven and explicitly captures expressed meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Semantic coding is the process of encoding information based on its meaning, allowing for more efficient storage and retrieval in memory

Data segments that appeared interesting, relevant, or meaningful for the research were identified, labeled, and then provided with the first descriptions, with an effort to ensure they were concise and analytically meaningful.

After completing the coding process, I decided to document it in the following table, which includes the codes, code labels (a brief explanation of what the code represents), segments of the narratives associated with the codes, and a final column linking segments of data to other codes to facilitate the categorization process.



Table 1 - Codes, meaning, and data segments

Code	Code label	Text or data segment examples associated with the code	Links to other codes
Death of a person	Death of a person as the reason for the grief	<p>R2 “The passing of my grandmother.”</p> <p>R10 “My earliest memory of grief, or rather someone I know passing away happened in third grade (8 years old).”</p> <p>R12 “First, when my grandfather died, I think I was 6 years old, we were at my grandparents’ farm and I saw my mother, her sister and my grandmother crying.”</p> <p>R13 “My father passed away when I was 7.”</p>	Related to <i>crying</i>
Happiness	Mainly associated with childhood, it is often viewed as a characteristic of this stage of life.	<p>R1 “Most of my childhood memories are positive and I remember my childhood as something happy.”</p> <p>R8 “The class teacher said everyone should try efforts to become happy.”</p> <p>R12 “When I think about my childhood, it is hard to remember many experiences of grief – rather I remember a large amount of positive events.”</p>	
Missing holidays	Missing holidays as the reason for the grief	R1 “As a child, for me, at that moment, the most important thing was the fact that we	



		would not visit PortAventura. [...] To my mind, the only important thing was PortAventura.”	
Crying	Instances or significance of crying as part of the grieving process.	<p>R1 “I don’t think I cried.”</p> <p>R5 “I cried over his paintings he made for me.”</p> <p>R6 “We sat silently and cried our eyes out (even crying now that I am writing this)”</p> <p>R6 “I would hide in the restroom whenever I had the chance and cry for a long time.”</p>	<p>Related to <i>ongoing</i></p> <p>Related to <i>coping mechanism</i></p>
Regrets	Addresses the feelings of remorse or missed opportunities associated with grief.	<p>R4 “I couldn’t say goodbye, I couldn’t kiss and hug her one last time.”</p> <p>R6 “I needed to say goodbye to my grandpa, but nobody cared, and this was killing me”</p> <p>R17 “I remember thinking a lot that I should have appreciated her more when everything was still fine. I remember being mostly sad about just the idea that I hadn’t appreciated her enough.”</p>	Related to <i>sadness</i>
Ongoing	The continuous nature or enduring impact of grief.	R4 “I still think of all the things I would have loved to tell her.”	



		<p>R9 “I have been feeling this lost since I remember. It has been present all the time. Even now.”</p> <p>R11 “I felt sad for a long time for the animals, and I still remember the grief to this day.”</p> <p>R14 “I still vividly remember how sad the house looked when our belongings—our stories and my childhood—had been removed from it.”</p>	<p>Related to <i>sadness</i></p> <p>Related to <i>sadness</i></p>
Confusion	Lack of understanding of themselves in the situation.	R5 “I felt like I lost myself.”	
Coping mechanism	Strategies or actions individuals use to manage the grief.	<p>R5 “I would write letters for him.”</p> <p>R7 “I remember often listening to music while lying on the floor of my room and crying.”</p>	Related to <i>crying</i>
Cultural aspect	Reference to their cultural background or context.	<p>R5 “She tried to make me happy by taking good care of me, but since females are not given equal treatment in my culture, she never had the power to defend my uncle.”</p> <p>R9 “My mother regularly took me to the cemetery where was my grandfather’s grave. We visited him at least once a week. We always brought fresh flowers and candles. I remember that I liked those visits. I liked the cemetery, its silence and calmness.”</p>	Related to <i>coping mechanism</i>



		<p>R10 “I think the concept of heaven was helpful.”</p> <p>R11 “All my old drawings about my family (and all the Christmas/birthday cards I drew) include all the dead animals too, as angels floating in the sky above me and my siblings. That is how I dealt with grief apparently.”</p>	<p>Related to <i>coping mechanism</i> Related to <i>coping mechanism</i></p>
<p>Consequences of the grief</p>	<p>Effects or outcomes that result from experiencing grief.</p>	<p>R5 “I became a quiet person in my teens. I struggled with confidence and speaking issues. I always felt that I will never have friends. I couldn’t make a good relationship with my siblings. Even after getting married, I struggled developing good intimacy with my husband.”</p> <p>R7 “I define this moment as a bridge between childhood and adolescence because I felt like I had to grow up.”</p> <p>R13 “As a kid, I wasn't feeling confident at the beginning since my friends and people around look me so pitifully and some friends bullied me that "I would not be able to get everything because I have no father". However, I raised by a single mom who taught me to be independent but still I grow with a daddy issue. It gives me a negative impact in trusting someone (until now), even my close family.”</p>	



<p>Adults' behaviour</p>	<p>Behaviors exhibited by adults in situations of grief.</p>	<p>R6 "My parents did not take us to the funeral." R6 "They were so shocked by the news that they hurried to the airport without ever explaining what had actually happened to me or my sister." R6 "Sadly, my parents never asked me how did I feel about it." R13 "My family did not explain the reason for his death. My mother asked me to persuade my sister (4 years old) that he was still alive, but he would be away for years doing something good."</p>	
<p>Physiological reaction</p>	<p>Bodily sensations or symptoms that may arise in response to the grief</p>	<p>R6 "I vividly remember I could not breathe anymore, my dear grandpa was gone." R5 "I fell badly sick and lost my health."</p>	
<p>Anger</p>	<p>The emotion of anger is experienced in response to the moment of the grief or the situation around it.</p>	<p>R6 "I was mad at my parents for not telling us about it and not taking us with them to the funeral." R6 "I could not play or even do my homework, all I was feeling was sorrow and anger"</p>	<p>Related to <i>sadness</i></p>
<p>Auditory experience</p>	<p>Sound-related perception or sensation during the grieving process.</p>	<p>R7 "I also had a weird experience where I thought I heard his voice in a voice recording on my phone, even though I didn't have any voice recordings of him. In this recording, he</p>	<p>Related to the <i>cultural aspect</i></p>



		said some encouraging words to me and I started to cry. When I played it back, it wasn't there anymore. I don't really believe in spirits or something but it was either that or just my imagination which is interesting to think about in retrospect, how our brains can make us experience things that aren't even tangible.”	
Bullying, social exclusion	Bullying and social exclusion as the reason for the grief.	R8 “Sort of bullying in primary school.”	
Pre-birth grief perception	The notion of experiencing grief before birth.	R9 “Perhaps it sounds weird, but I strongly believe that for the first time I experienced grief I was still unborn. My mother was in her 8 th month of pregnancy when her father, the closest and the most important person in her life, suddenly died because of a heart attack”	
Reflective emotions/ empathetic response	Experience of feeling emotions because others around the respondent are also experiencing them.	R9 “So, I grew up with her sadness and grief. In a way, her grief became my grief. Her sadness turned into my sadness.”	Related to <i>sadness</i>
Talking about death	Social and cultural avoidance to have conversations about death or dead people.	R9 “She wasn’t very keen on talking about my grandfather.” R10 “I think death was never too unfamiliar since <u>my father was a pastor and he went to funerals all the time</u> . So I was familiar with the concept of death very early on and was not too uncomfortable with it, this person was just the first person I knew on a personal level who had passed away. I <u>think it helped that death</u>	Related to the <i>cultural aspect</i> Related to <i>coping mechanism</i>



		<p><u>was a topic I had talked about with the adults around before this happened.”</u></p> <p>R12 “I tried to ask them but quickly noticed that they didn’t want to talk with me.”</p> <p>R13 “Many years later, my mom still avoids talking about my past father and their memories.”</p> <p>R19 “I also think that talking about death back then and now is taboo, awkward, and not encouraged. Perhaps being able to talk about the death of my grandma more would have helped.”</p>	
Lack of understanding	Confusion or lack of understanding about the situation or the concept of grief itself.	<p>R10 “I don’t know if I was grieving, but I remember feeling very very sad for the parents.”</p> <p>R12 “They told me that grandfather had died but I still did not understand why they cried.”</p> <p>R20 “I remember crying on my mother’s lap and asking my mom why my dad was leaving.”</p>	Related to <i>reflective emotions/ empathetic response</i>
Death of an animal	The death of an animal is the reason for the grief.	<p>R11 “Around the age of six to eight, many of the animals passed away.”</p> <p>R17 “The earliest memory I could describe as grief was when our dog had to be put down.”</p>	



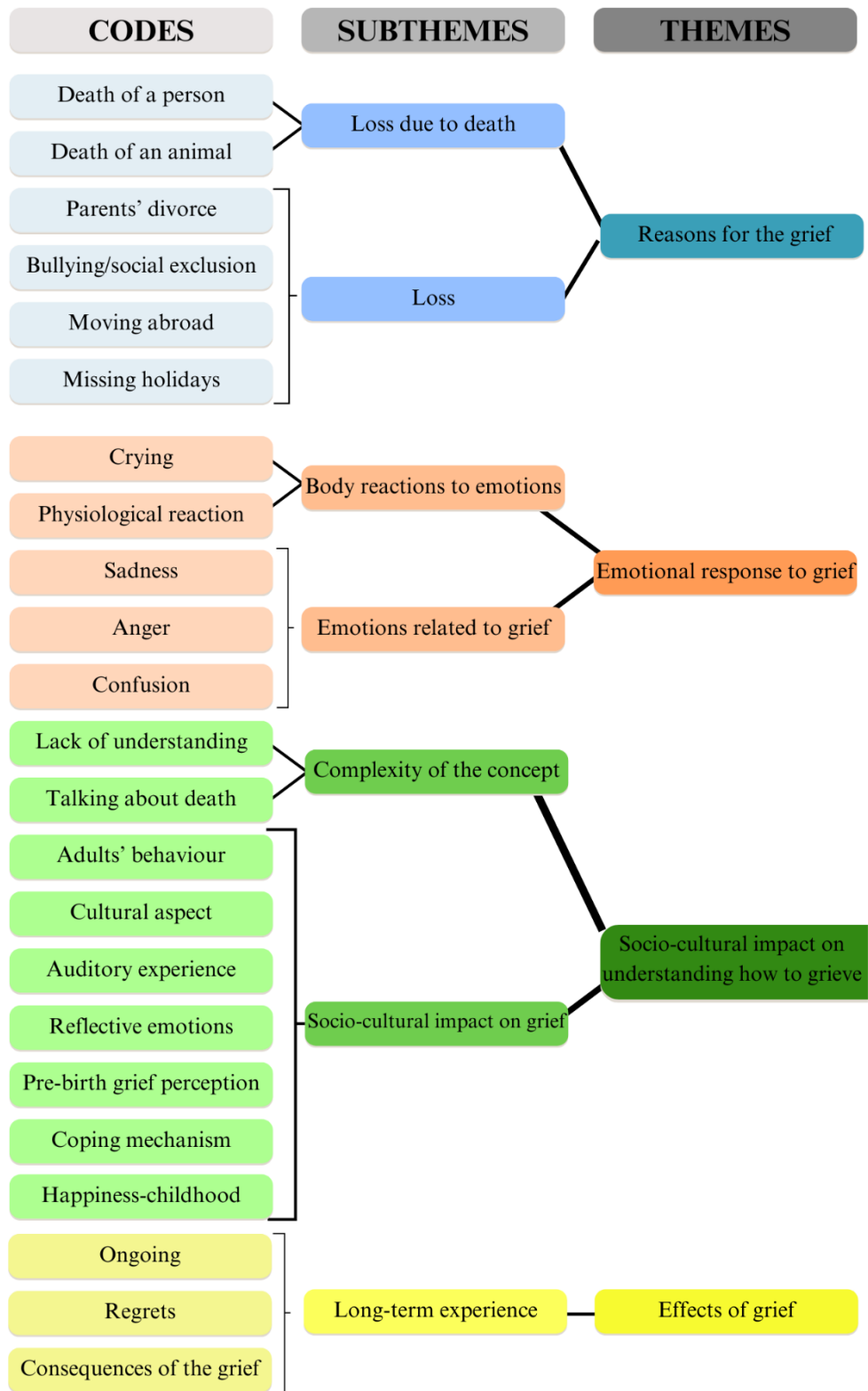
<p>Sadness</p>	<p>The emotion of sadness is experienced in response to the moment of the grief or the situation around it.</p>	<p>R12 “I was sad about grandfather dying but I couldn’t connect it with the adults crying.”</p> <p>R13 “I was so sad at that time and cried for a while.”</p> <p>R11 “I felt sad for a long time for the animals, [...]”</p> <p>R15 “I told his daughter "I am really sad because I will miss him throwing me up and down every time we come over”.”</p>	<p>Related to <i>crying</i></p> <p>Related to <i>crying</i></p>
<p>Moving abroad</p>	<p>Moving abroad as the reason for the grief. Loss of home.</p>	<p>R14 “Together with my family, I moved abroad and away from my childhood home at the age of 7. [...] That’s my earliest memory of grief.”</p>	
<p>Parents’ divorce/separation</p>	<p>Parents’ divorce/separation as the reason for the grief.</p>	<p>R16 “For me, grief is relative to what one has gone through. When I think of an early experience of grief, I think of my parents’ divorce when I was four years old. To me, it felt like I had lost my family.”</p> <p>R20 “One of my earliest experiences of grief was around when I was 3-4 years old. It was when my parents separated.”</p>	

After the codes were established, the value of visualizing them through a diagram was recognized. This simplifies the analysis process and assists in identifying patterns and themes within the narratives.

Intending to create a diagram containing codes, subthemes, and themes, the thematic analysis process entered its third phase: *generating themes*. For this, the technique of drawing thematic maps was employed.

The following diagram illustrates the previously created codes, organized into different subthemes, and the candidate themes generated from them:

Figure 1 - Codes, subthemes, and themes



After the initial themes, referred to as candidate themes, were created, the fourth phase of analysis was carried out: *developing and reviewing the themes*. This phase involves revisiting the full dataset and ensuring that these themes make sense both in relation to the full dataset and the codes created. It is crucial that the themes collectively highlight the most significant patterns in the data and individually carry meaningful relevance (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

During this phase of the analysis, it was decided to make some changes to the candidate themes. The theme originally named *effects of grief* was considered as part of the theme *reasons for the grief*. This theme not only encompasses information about the various reasons for grief but also addresses the different effects of grief depending on the individual, including regrets, ongoing grief, and the consequences experienced by each person. Therefore, it was decided to incorporate this information as part of the theme: *subjectivity of grief* (Listed in table 3).

After the development and review of the candidate themes, the study progressed to phase five: *refining, defining, and naming the themes*. Upon redefining and renaming the themes that had been generated and developed previously, following Clarke and Braun's (2021) guidelines on defining and naming themes, the final themes for analysis and their definitions were the following:

Table 2 – Final themes

<i>Candidate themes</i>	<i>Potential names for the final themes</i>	<i>Final themes</i>
Reasons for the grief	Subjectivity of grief	Grief is relative to what one has gone through
Long-term		
Emotional response to grief	The emotional response to grief	The emotional response to grief
Socio-cultural impact on understanding how to grieve	Socio-cultural impact on understanding how to grieve	Socio-cultural impact on understanding how to grieve

“Grief is relative to what one has gone through”

This quote from one of the respondents captures the theme of exploring the notion that grief is a highly subjective experience, ranging from the reasons for experiencing grief to the way each individual remembers that moment of grief as an adult. It is something that, in some cases, remains present, evokes regrets, or has brought long-term consequences.

The emotional response to grief

This theme delves into the variety of emotions individuals undergo when confronted with grief. It includes feelings such as sadness, anger, and confusion, along with physical reactions like crying. This theme provides insight into how people process and express their emotions in response to loss, offering valuable perspectives on the ways individuals navigate the complexities of grieving experiences. Through this exploration, I aim to understand how children experience and express grief from an emotional standpoint.

Socio-cultural impact on understanding how to grieve

This theme encompasses various topics related to how each person's socio-cultural environment influences their experience of grief. The topics include the lack of understanding of the situation (often due to the taboo nature of death), the coping mechanisms many people turn to (such as religion), and how children's emotions during grief are often influenced by social dynamics as they observe others' behavior, among others. This encouraged us to analyze the socio-cultural impact of grief to understand how individuals learn to grieve and how children from diverse cultural backgrounds experience this process.

4. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

With the themes named and defined, the thematic analysis process arrived at its last phase: writing up. This chapter will present the study's findings by analyzing each theme in distinct sections. Each section will incorporate participants' voices reinforcing the theme, contrasted with the theoretical framework, and compared to Brinkmann's (2019a) study.

4.1 Grief is relative to what one has gone through

While many of the narratives reference the death of a loved one or an animal as the reason for their grief, supporting the idea that “grief is commonly associated with death” (Gross, 2016:9), the responses still vary significantly regarding what they share as childhood experiences of grief.

Some examples of the death of a person as the reason for their grief can be: “the passing of my grandmother” (R2); “my uncle died during his treatment” (R5), “my grandfather passed away when I was ten years old” (R6). While these previous examples share the death as the reason for the grief, some examples also show how the participants’ understanding of grief is related to someone dying: “I was 11 when my grandfather died, and this was the first time someone close to me passed away” (R7) or “my earliest memory of grief, or rather someone I know passing away happened in third grade” (R10). These two accounts suggest that despite knowing that grief may be happening for various reasons beyond just death, participants still hold onto the notion that they only grieve when someone close passes away. This can prevent people from recognizing grief in other situations.

There are a couple of accounts that talk about the death of an animal as a reason for the grief: “around the age of six to eight, many of the animals passed away” (R11) and “the earliest memory I could describe as grief was when our dog had to be put down” (R17). Even if people understand death as a reason for grief, it is also important to mention that the increasing literature on pet loss indicates that many grieving pet owners undergo “disenfranchised grief” (Spain et al., 2019). This is understood as the type of grief that is not acknowledged or validated by society, making it difficult for individuals to openly mourn or receive support.

On the other hand, a couple of respondents shared that their parents' divorce or separation was the reason for their grief. One of them states, "one of my earliest experiences of grief was around when I was 3-4 years old. It was when my parents separated" (R20). Another example says: "For me, grief is relative to what one has gone through. When I think of an early experience of grief, I think of my parents' divorce when I was four years old. To me, it felt like I had lost my family" (R16). These responses evidence that divorce or separation are considered grief, despite some studies having mentioned that traditionally divorce has not been considered as grief (Klurfeld et al., 2020), also from the perspective of children whose parents are getting divorced.

In line with the topic of family, one participant explains that their memory of grief was when they had to move abroad, as "in some sense it felt like I was actively taking part on destroying the most important and safe space that I had known as a child" (R14). While grief has been examined from the perspective of displacement from homes following examples such as natural disasters (Morrice, 2013), scientific research on the grief associated with moving abroad has not been found, which typically involves not only the loss of place as physical space but also the loss of human connections such as friendships or family. However, there is a concept emerging known as "expat grief", which is increasingly widespread on the internet, even if there is no formal research on it yet. Given the globalization nowadays, I believe that this concept is becoming more popular and should be more acknowledged in and research about grief.

From authors who have already discussed this concept (e.g., Claudia & Dani, 2023; Encina, n.d.; Rössler, 2021), "expat grief" refers to the mix of emotions expatriates feel when they live abroad and experience loss. Moving away from their home country can make them miss loved ones or feel disconnected from their homeland. Sometimes, expats may feel guilty for leaving and think they've caused pain to those they left behind. They might also struggle to balance their new life abroad with their connections back home.

Other reasons for the grief have been some "sort of bullying in primary school" (R8) and missing holidays: "As a child, for me, at that moment, the most important thing was the fact that we would not visit PortAventura. [...] To my mind, the only important thing was PortAventura" (R1). These two examples of grief can also be seen in the publication by Lipponen and Pursi (2022). On the one hand, these authors reference

social exclusion as one of the first reasons for children's grief, and on the other hand, they explain how "grief is present in the minor losses of everyday life" (2022:2), with the loss of holidays being an example of this.

However, it's not just the reasons for the grief that make it a subjective experience. Several participants expressed the regrets they felt or still feel about grieving situation. Some of them share that grief is still present nowadays and many narratives show how the grief the respondents experienced during their childhood had some consequences on them. As an example, one person shared that after their uncle died:

“I became a quiet person in my teens. I struggled with confidence and speaking issues. I always felt that I will never have friends. I couldn't make a good relationship with my siblings. Even after getting married, I struggled developing good intimacy with my husband.” (R5)

This example evidences the potential correlation between childhood grief and vulnerability in adulthood to various significant situations, such as impairment in terms of sexual identity, autonomy development, and capacity for intimacy (Owen et al., 1985).

Another account that shares the consequences of the grief is the following: “However, I [was] raised by a single mom who taught me to be independent but still I grew with a daddy issue. It gives me a negative impact in trusting someone (until now), even my close family.” (R13) As explained by Owen et al. (1985), the death of a parent, mother, or sibling often affects a child's capacity for basic trust, as they wonder questions about their role in the loss and fear about their own safety and security.

All these examples provided by the participants are clear evidence of grief been relative to what one has gone through, showing that grief is a subjective experience that depends on each person's life and what that person has lived through so far. The reason for it, as well as the impact that it has on someone's life, is something that varies from person to person.

4.2 The emotional response to grief

To initiate this section, where I will delve into the emotional aspect of grief, I would like to start with the following quote from one of the participants of my research:



“Perhaps it sounds weird but I strongly believe that for the first time I experienced grief when I was still unborn. My mother was in 8th month of pregnancy when her father, the closest and the most important person in her life, suddenly died because of heart attack. She was in great shock, then she was extremely depressed. I was born one month after my grandfather's death. Everything was still fresh and my mother needed to force herself to take care of me. But she couldn't force herself to escape from her feelings. So I grow up with her sadness and grief. In a way, her grief became my grief. Her sadness turned into my sadness.” (R9)

This account illustrates how emotions can be learned. Despite never meeting the person who passed away, the participant experienced grief and sadness because their mother, who was deeply affected by the loss, raised them while still grieving. This suggests that the participant's emotional response was influenced by their mother's grief, highlighting the learned aspect of emotions.

In general, the most mentioned emotions related to grief in the participants' narratives are sadness, anger, and confusion. These emotions are sometimes identified in situations directly linked to death, such as: "I felt really sad and angry after my grandfather died. I couldn't even do my homework." (R6) In other cases, they refer to the circumstances surrounding the loss that made them feel angry: "I was mad at my parents for not telling us about it and not taking us to the funeral." (R6)

Although these segments may not provide direct evidence that emotions are learned, most of the recounted stories are accompanied by the concept of *crying*. It is interesting to note that crying is mentioned in many of the narratives, even when it did not happen. As an example, a participant mentions "I don't think I cried" (R1) when talking about their moment of grief. This highlights how, socially, grief moments are associated with crying. This respondent felt the need to share that they did not cry, probably because it felt like something that it should have happened, and thus associated with the surrounding socio-cultural factors.

In discussing crying, I also find it important to bring the following words of one of the participants:

“First, when my grandfather died, I think that I was 6 years old, we were at the grandparents' farm and I saw my mother, her sister and my grandmother crying. They told me that grandfather had died but I still did not understand why they cried. [...] I was sad about grandfather dying but I couldn't connect it with the adults crying. It was probably something that I had not seen before.” (R12)

The participant's statement reflects a complex understanding of crying in the context of grief. While feeling sadness about seeing their grandfather's death, they couldn't connect the adults' tears with their own emotions. This suggests a lack of familiarity with intense emotional expressions related to grief. The phrase "probably something I had not seen before" indicates a new experience with grieving emotions. Overall, the statement highlights the participant's exploration of the meaning of crying in grief and their efforts to understand their own emotional responses in challenging situations, which follows the idea that grieving is something that is learned, but, in this case, was not taught nor explained.

This participant's response is relevant not only for the emotional response to grief but also as an introduction for the next one, which will address the lack of understanding.

4.3 Socio-cultural impact on understanding how to grieve

This theme encompasses the analysis of all aspects of the narratives associated with the socio-cultural impact on how we learn to grieve.

In line with the last part of the previous section, it is evident that many of the experiences lack understanding regarding what was happening at the time. Some examples of this, apart from the one mentioned earlier, include: "I did not understand a lot what was happening, but I knew that I missed my mom and did not want to leave her" (R16); "I remember not really being sure why everybody was crying and so serious" (R19) and "I didn't have the tools to understand and process a relative dying". (R6)

These narratives suggest that children in those situations were not clear about what was happening or why people were acting in a certain way. Additionally, the last piece of the narrative also mentions not having the tools to comprehend the situation. Regarding the adults' behavior in the grieving situations, we find that some children did not receive an explanation from the adults about what was happening. This is a good example: "They were so shocked by the news that they hurried to the airport without ever explaining what had actually happened to me or my sister" (R6). This quote shows that the parents did not explain the situation, probably due to the shock they were experiencing or some time constraint. Another participant wrote the following: "My

family did not explain the reason for his death. My mother asked me to persuade my sister (4 years old) that he was still alive, but he would be away for years doing something good". (R13)

It is an experience that is difficult to analyse without knowing more about it. However, the fact of not talking about death is indeed something that is very present in the participants' responses. As one of the respondents stated: "I also think that talking about death back then and now is taboo, awkward, and not encouraged. Perhaps being able to talk about the death of my grandma more would have helped" (R19). However, grieving experiences are different and, on the contrary, another participant said:

"I think death was never too unfamiliar since my father was a pastor and he went to funerals all the time. So I was familiar with the concept of death very early on and was not too uncomfortable with it, this person was just the first person I knew on a personal level who had passed away. I think it helped that death was a topic I had talked about with the adults around before this happened." (R10)

In this quote, it is not only perceived that discussing death positively influenced this person's grief in childhood, but one could also observe a cultural aspect, such as religion, as they mention that their father was a pastor. Other narratives where participants refer to culture for different reasons were also part of the dataset.

This participant exemplified how the cultural aspects was relevant to them:

"My mother regularly took me to the cemetery where my grandfather's grave was. We visited him at least once a week. We always brought fresh flowers and candles. I remember that I liked those visits. I liked the cemetery, its silence, and calmness." (R9)

This is a clear example of a routine, following a family member's death, linked to a cultural-religious tradition. As Neimeyer et al. (2021) state, religious, and spiritual beliefs provide various ways to handle death. These practices can bring comfort and help people gradually overcome grief, eventually finding peace and returning to their usual routines. Another respondent also shared the way they dealt with grief by explaining the following: "All my old drawings about my family (and all the Christmas/birthday cards I drew) include all the dead animals too, as angels floating in the sky above me and my siblings. That is how I dealt with grief apparently" (R11). Lastly, one participant shared that: "I think the concept of heaven was helpful." (R10)



There is another important finding where a cultural aspect can be found. One respondent explained: “She tried to make me happy by taking good care of me, but since females are not given equal treatment in my culture, she never had the power to defend my uncle” (R5). This made me realize that in most of the narratives in which a person supporting the grief is mentioned, the figures are female roles: sisters, mothers, or grandmothers. This is not further analyzed in this thesis since it is not the focus of the study, but it may imply that grief is gendered.

Finally, in a few narratives, I encountered the idea of childhood happiness. An example of this is: "The class teacher said everyone should try efforts to become happy" (R8). This statement shows how adults perceive childhood as a time when children should be happy, thereby invalidating the grieving process the child may be going through. It may also imply, from the perspective of an educator, that the classroom teacher has not been equipped with the appropriate resources to address grief with their students.

5. DISCUSSION AND COMPARISON TO BRINKMANN'S STUDY

This chapter has 2 sections. The first section, explains the key findings of the study, contrasting them with the theoretical background, and addressing the research question 1 of this study, which revolves around how do individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds recount their earlier life experiences of grief. The second section, compares the results obtained with Brinkmann's (2019a) original study, providing an answer to research question 2 on what ways do individuals from different cultural backgrounds cope with and express grief from earlier life experiences

5.1 Key findings

The first aim of this study was to understand how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds recount their earlier life experiences of grief.

Reflecting on the theoretical framework presented earlier, grief was discussed as encompassing a variety of losses. Comparing the previous research with outcomes of this study, it is evident that while death remains the primary reason, divorce or parental separation also emerge as common causes of grief. My results also highlight the concept of social exclusion as a reason for grief, as previously noted by other authors (Lipponen & Pursi, 2022; Quiñones et al., 2021).

Interestingly, reasons like job loss or economic uncertainty (Berinato, 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2021), previously researched, were absent in the responses of the participants. This absence may be attributed to the fact that the respondents are recounting childhood experiences, during which such circumstances may not have occurred. However, one of the participants mentioned relocation, which could be as a consequence of the previously mentioned reasons such as a job loss.

Regarding ecological grief (Benham & Hoerst, 2024), it is worth noting that the study referenced earlier is relatively recent, while the narratives shared by the participants date back several years. Nonetheless, the findings have shown reasons for grief such as migration, another current challenge nowadays, demonstrated through what has been termed "expat grief". Although this concept may relate to Morrice's (2013) study, it

undoubtedly needs further exploration in future research since it is a current challenge in our societies.

The illustration of holiday loss emphasizes the notion that grief encompasses a variety of losses and is upon each individual's perceptions and feelings at specific moments in their life.

In terms of the emotional aspect of grief, the data has shown that grief, along with other emotions such as sadness, is something that is learned. Furthermore, crying has been very present in the narratives, which supports the idea that crying is a way for children to express their emotions and understand the world around them (Brinkmann, 2019a; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018; Quiñones et al., 2022). However, this can also be evidence of how children follow what adults do, mirroring their example.

Previously discussed was the understanding that grief varies significantly from person to person and across different cultures. Recent studies by various authors have emphasized this point, highlighting how grief can change over time and manifest differently depending on cultural background (Brinkmann, 2019b; Kofod & Brinkmann, 2018; Pulkkinen, 2017; Pursi et al., 2024).

For instance, the analysis reveals that the way individuals cope with grief often reflects religious traditions observed after death, such as participating in funerals or visiting the cemetery regularly. Moreover, socio-cultural norms dictate how death is addressed and discussed within families and communities, with practices varying significantly based on socio-cultural beliefs. Furthermore, even the coping mechanisms used by individuals during times of grief are very related to their religious and cultural backgrounds. For example, some participants described drawing angels in the sky or finding help in the concept of heaven, reflecting their cultural and religious beliefs.

All of these are examples of connections between personal experiences and cultural context, idea that both cultural-historical approach (Gutierrez, 2002; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003), and cultural psychology-based studies on grief (Brinkmann, 2017; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018; Pulkkinen, 2017) support.

One aspect highlighted in this context is the taboo surrounding death. While it's widely recognized that death is often considered a taboo subject, my research responses provide insight into how children perceive and experience the consequences of this societal

taboo. As outlined by Gorosabel-Odrizola and Mejía (2016), fear and apprehension among adults have contributed to making death a taboo topic, particularly in many Western societies. Efforts are made by adults to shield children from this reality, often due to the belief that children lack the necessary cognitive and emotional maturity to cope with discussions about death. However, my research findings challenge this notion, suggesting that children could actually benefit from open and natural conversations about death. The responses in this study offer evidence to this idea, as some participants mention how talking about death made grieving easier for them, while others suggest that discussing death would have been helpful. To sum up, considering the findings from this research, talking about death is seen as beneficial when coping with grief.

Finally, one of the results from the data is the mention of happiness as a part of childhood. There are participants whose grief was invalidated by the need to be happy in childhood. This is something Lipponen and Pursi (2022) also mentioned. This idea leads adults to not accept children's grief, and children may not find space to grieve, as it is deemed as a "wrong" practice and not "what they should be doing" at that age.

The results obtained from this study affirm the first hypothesis suggesting that adults from diverse cultural backgrounds will recount varied earlier life expressions and experiences of grief, influenced by socio-cultural factors such as traditions, norms, and social contexts.

This is evidenced by illustrating that individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds indeed recount varied expressions and experiences of grief earlier in their lives. These experiences are heavily influenced by socio-cultural factors such as traditions, norms, and social contexts. While death remains a common trigger for grief, the findings reveal the significance of other factors like divorce, migration, and social exclusion in shaping individuals' experiences of grief across different cultural contexts.

5.2 Comparison to Brinkmann's study

The second aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that suggested that the experiences and expressions of grief observed in individuals from diverse cultural

backgrounds will both validate and extend the findings of Brinkmann's (2019a) original study, highlighting the influence of cultural diversity on the grieving process.

One of the findings from Brinkmann showed that children's grief always involved people, arguing that grief happens socially. This finding has also been evidenced in this study with the addition that most of the people involved were female figures. However, whether grief is gendered or not is absent in Brinkmann's.

The second result from the original study was that the majority of the accounts shared memories of doubt, not knowing how to feel in the moment of the grief since they had not learned how to do so. My findings also show the same idea, as many participants shared that at the time, they did not understand what was happening, except for those children who had been exposed to the topic of death or had talked about it.. This has been also related to the behaviours that adults had in the situation and the lack of talking about death in general.

In the last finding in Brinkmann's study, grief often appears mixed with other emotions like anger, shame, and guilt, rather than standing alone as a single feeling. This was also the case in the current study, but mainly with the emotions of anger and sadness, and the act of crying.

Thus, the main findings in Brinkmann's study are validated with this study. However, the main discoveries in this research also include a variety of losses understood as grief, socio-cultural aspects such as rituals as part of the grieving moments, and diverse coping mechanisms related to culture and religion.

Therefore, the hypothesis posed for the second research question can be confirmed since the results obtained in this study validate those obtained by Brinkmann and also provide additional insights into the influence that socio-cultural context has on the grieving process experienced by children.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This final chapter of the research aims to present the limitations of the study, suggestions for further research, and potential implications.

6.1 Limitations of the study

The limitations of the study are shared in this section to acknowledge the factors that may have affected the research outcomes and interpretations.

First, the nationality of the participants was not asked, which was a deliberate choice made to safeguard their anonymity. The decision was driven by the concern that disclosing such personal information could compromise the anonymity of the respondents due to the relatively small sample size and discourage them from participating in research that contemplates a topic that is considered sensitive by many. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that including this information could have provided valuable insights into culture-specific approaches to grieving, thus enhancing the study's depth and understanding.

A second limitation of the research is the questionnaire with a single question that gives participants complete freedom to respond as they wish. It would be interesting and provide more information to delve deeper into certain responses to better understand and contextualize the experiences and expressions of grief. This could be done by using a different research method such as interview or by adding more specific questions to the questionnaire.

Another limitation of the study pertains to the language in which it was conducted. In many cases, English is the second or third language of the participants. Discussing such a sensitive topic is challenging in itself, regardless of the language used, but it becomes even more difficult when not communicating in one's first language. Personally, English is my third language, which may have resulted in some loss of information during the interpretation of the participants' narratives.

Finally, the topic of grief is highly sensitive. As mentioned in the participant section, one potential participant personally shared that while they would like to participate in this research, they couldn't do so due to the pain it would bring. This may also have been the situation for other potential participants.

6.2 Suggestions for further research

Regarding the first limitation, it would be valuable to conduct a study knowing the nationality of the participants in order to make comparisons and assess cross-cultural variations in grief.

In terms of individuals involved in children's grief, it would be interesting to investigate which figures are most commonly present and determine if gender has any correlation.

Finally, it would be valuable to conduct a study on the concept of “expat grief”. This idea stems from the findings of this study and is further supported by my personal experience. As a teacher in an international school, I have observed many children experiencing the emotional challenges of moving away from their homes and leaving behind the connections they have formed. This form of grief, which is prevalent among children in international settings, has not yet been thoroughly researched.

Understanding “expat grief” could provide crucial insights into how to better support these children as they navigate their unique grieving process.

6.3 Implications of the study

After understanding additional factors of how grief affects children from a socio-cultural diversity perspective, this study can help develop more culturally sensitive approaches to supporting children through their grief experiences. Some examples for this can be the following:

1. Language and communication: in many cultures, discussing death and grief is taboo or handled in a very specific way. By understanding these cultural characteristics, support programs can incorporate appropriate language and communication styles. For example, some cultures may use metaphors, religion, or indirect language to discuss death, which can be integrated into classroom discussions and therapy sessions to make children feel more comfortable.
2. Rituals and traditions: different cultures have unique mourning rituals and traditions that help children process grief. Recognizing and respecting these practices can enhance support approaches. For instance, incorporating elements



of a child's cultural mourning rituals into grief counselling sessions can provide a sense of familiarity and comfort.

3. Beliefs: religion and spirituality often play a significant role in how grief is understood and managed. Support approaches that acknowledge and incorporate a child's religious and spiritual beliefs can help them make sense of their loss.
4. Expression of emotions: cultural norms influence how emotions are expressed and processed. In some cultures, expressing emotions such as grief openly is encouraged, while in others, it is not. Support strategies can be adapted to align with these cultural norms, ensuring that children feel understood and validated in their emotional expressions.

Similarly, this study can assist professionals working in educational settings with children to better understand their needs and provide more effective support. Educators can design classroom activities that are sensitive to the needs of grieving children. For example, incorporating activities that allow children to express their feelings through art, writing, or storytelling can provide a healthy outlet for their grief. Understanding that grief can affect a child's concentration, memory, and academic performance, educators can also make temporary adjustments to academic expectations. Lastly, schools can foster a supportive environment by promoting a culture of empathy and understanding. This can include classroom discussions about grief and loss, or even support groups and counselling services tailored to the needs of grieving children. For example, grief support groups that are culturally sensitive and age-appropriate can offer a safe space for children to share their experiences and receive peer support.

Finally, the results of this study may encourage individuals working with children to have open discussions about death and various losses, thus facilitating the grieving process when it occurs. As clearly shown in the collected findings of this study, the fact that the loss was not discussed before it happened or at the moment it occurred was the reason why many children did not understand what was happening and did not know how to handle the situation.

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8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Privacy notice letter

Collection of narratives of early experiences of grief

Dear student,

Can you think of an early experience of grief? Could you share that memory, perhaps, adding the circumstances of your grief: how old you were at the time, how you reacted and how others reacted, what helped you?

I am interested in all kinds of answers. Therefore, your responses are valuable whether they are negative or positive memories, whether they are shorter or longer answers, with more or less details explained... There are no right or wrong answers.

This questionnaire is intended for any students from the Changing Education international master's program taught at the University of Helsinki.

Taking part in the interview is voluntary and strictly anonymous. It will not be possible to identify the respondent from the responses. Only fragments of the narratives shared in the questionnaire will be reported.

Thank you for taking the time to share these personal experiences that will help to learn more about childhood grief and how children learn to grieve.

Kind regards,

Maitane Yela

Appendix 2 – Consent form

Consent form

Project title: Children's grief and grieving in narrations of international students' childhood experiences

Investigator:

This consent form is for taking part in a questionnaire for Maitane Yela's master's thesis examining Children's grief and grieving in narrations of international students' childhood experiences. In the following text, I will describe the aims and procession of my research. Please read the following information, do not hesitate to ask if you need clarification and consider if you have the possibility to take part in this study.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this study is to examine international students' early experiences of grief. Participants will be asked to answer the question: *Would you please write about an early experience of grief?* Giving the respondent freedom in the format and length of their response, and asking if they could add details of the circumstances of that grief.

Data collection and participation

The answers to the questionnaire will be analyzed using qualitative methods, more specifically, thematic content analysis. Participation in questionnaire is voluntary and the participants are free to withdraw at any time.

Anonymity and data storage

Passages from the narratives will be used in the master's thesis. Your identity as an informant will be protected: any documents labelled with your name or personal information will be anonymized.

Participant's Permission

I have read the consent form and conditions of this study. I have had the opportunity to discuss the consent form with the investigator. Any questions I have about this research have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

Please check the box "*I have read and accept the conditions and give my consent to participate in this study*" so that your answer can be used in the research previously explained.

If you have any further questions about this study, please contact:

Maitane Yela (*Maitane.yela-valencia@helsinki.fi*)