

Family dynamics following parental loss:  
A comparison of mother- and father-headed families

Kathrin Börner

Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie  
am Fachbereich Erziehungswissenschaften,  
Psychologie und Sportwissenschaften  
der Freien Universität Berlin

Berlin/Boston  
1999

Gutachter: Prof. Dr. P. B. Baltes  
Prof. Dr. U. M. Staudinger

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation was conducted in different places. The constellation planned originally was that I be a doctoral student at the Department of Psychology, Free University Berlin (with Dr. Margret Baltes as main advisor), but that I spend most of my time in Cambridge, MA, USA, in order to be able to work on a particular dataset. My affiliation with the FU-Berlin came about because I knew that Dr. Margret Baltes, who I had met through a class she had given at the University of Trier, shared my interest for the topic of coping with loss.

My affiliation with Harvard University was made possible through Dr. Phyllis Silverman, Co-Principal Investigator of the MGH/Harvard Child Bereavement Study, who I had contacted because I felt that her study was ideally suitable to my research interests. She not only was willing to give me access to this outstanding dataset, but also arranged for me to get an appointment as research fellow at the Psychiatry Department of Harvard Medical School. I am deeply grateful to her for making this situation possible.

In terms of my connection to Berlin, Dr. Margret Baltes could not have been more flexible in supervising my work via email, mail, or meetings whenever I was in Germany. All in all, I felt that I was in a very privileged situation: I was financially supported by the Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst (DAAD). I was working with an intriguing dataset, on a topic that lay at the heart of my research interests, in the context of Harvard as well as other schools in the greater Boston area that together provided a stimulating surrounding and many worthwhile contacts. On top of all this, and despite the distance, I felt strongly supported by Dr. Margret Baltes who was always able to give helpful input and motivate me. On this background, everything moved along fairly smoothly, mostly in a good spirits.

Margret Baltes' death on January 28, 1999 hit me like a hammer. Ironically, I received another stipend to support me in finishing up my dissertation from the Kommission zur Vergabe von Promotionsstipendien (NaFoeG), two days later. Yet, the loss of my advisor threw me off track, not in the sense that my working pace was any different than before, but that the basic feeling about my work changed. The whole idea of a dissertation really seemed ludicrous in the face of the loss of someone who I so much respected and admired both as a researcher and as a person. In addition, although Dr. Paul Baltes had offered his support right away, I was afraid that whoever was going to take over her position would want me to make basic changes in my, at this point, fairly advanced dissertation. I did not know yet how fortunate, again, I was going to be.

In June 1999, I went to Berlin to meet with Dr. Paul Baltes and Dr. Jacqui Smith to discuss the most current draft of my dissertation. They suggested that I come to Berlin for a few weeks so that I could tune up my thesis, and have the opportunity to receive and discuss feedback more directly. Dr. Paul Baltes arranged that I get the status of a visiting graduate student at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, which allowed me to work there and have access to all the resources I needed. Looking back, I do not know how to express my gratitude for the support that I received during this time at the Max Planck Institute. The feedback that I received from Dr. Paul Baltes, Dr. Jacqui Smith, Dr. Ursula Staudinger, and Dr. Jutta Heckhausen was enormously helpful, constructive and stimulating. Their comments and suggestions were not only extremely helpful with regard to the primary purpose of fine tuning and finishing up of my dissertation, but it also made me fully enjoy this final phase. This is what I am most grateful for - to all of them; that a situation was provided for me, in which I could regain what I consider my most important resource, and what I felt I had lost over the past months - my enthusiasm!

With regard to my academic development and evolving interest in the topic of loss, I want to thank Dr. Jochen Brandtstaedter and Dr. Camille Wortman for paving the way to where I stand now. Furthermore, I am grateful to all the people who, over the course of the past two years, read and gave me feedback to the numerous drafts of my dissertation. In this respect, I want to give special mention to Dr. Phyllis Silverman and Jennifer Battaglia. Most of all, I am thankful to my family for their support at all fronts. Neither my dissertation nor the experiences that lead me to it would have been possible without the resourcefulness of this family context. Last but not least, I thank Rupert and Johanna for being on my side, for bearing with me and keeping my life in balance.

To Margret Baltes who will always be a source of inspiration for me

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Perspectives on Grief .....	5
1.1 Traditional views.....	6
1.2 Current understanding of grief.....	8
1.2.1 Loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping.....	9
1.2.2 Paradigm shift: from breaking bonds to continuing bonds .....	9
1.3 Literature review of grief as a family process.....	11
1.3.1 Case studies and clinical observations .....	12
1.3.2 Systematic studies .....	13
1.4 Gender effects in bereavement.....	16
1.5 Summary .....	17
2. Coping Theory.....	18
2.1 Two major coping modes.....	19
2.2 Conservation of resources .....	22
2.3 Selective optimization with compensation.....	25
2.4 Summary .....	27
3. Family Theory .....	28
3.1 Family systems theory.....	28
3.2 Family stress theory .....	31
3.3 Summary .....	34
4. Relational Theory .....	34
5. Approaches to Research: A Brief Digression .....	38
5.1 Qualitative and quantitative research.....	38
5.2 Connected and separate knowing.....	40
5.3 Efforts of integration.....	42
6. Concluding Summary.....	43
<b>III. METHODS.....</b>	<b>46</b>
1. Harvard Child Bereavement Study .....	46
2. The Present Study.....	48
2.1 Sample.....	48
2.2 Data analysis .....	52
2.2.1 Rationale.....	53
2.2.2 Procedure and research questions.....	55
2.2.3 Quality control of data analysis.....	62
2.2.4 Computerized coding: FolioVIEWS .....	66
<b>IV. FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>69</b>

1. Circumstances Surrounding the Loss .....	70
2. Meaning of the Loss .....	73
3. Connectedness Within the Family.....	74
4. Connectedness Outside the Family .....	78
5. Family Communication.....	82
6. Being in Touch with Each Other.....	87
7. Maintaining Continuity in Family Life .....	90
8. Accommodation to Loss and Life Changes .....	98
9. Summary .....	106
<b>V. DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>109</b>
1. Limitations of the Present Study .....	109
2. Looking Beyond one Source of Data .....	112
3. Dealing with family life after the loss.....	114
3.1 How to frame the grieving process .....	116
3.2 Losing and rebuilding family resources.....	119
3.3 Continuity in family life.....	121
3.4 Parenting styles and developmental goals.....	123
4. Concluding Thoughts and Outlook .....	125
<b>VI. REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>VII. APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>152</b>
Appendix A: Interview themes and example items .....	152
Appendix B: Standardized measures in the Harvard Child Bereavement Study .....	157
Appendix C: Coding guidelines that formalize how to deal with difficult cases.....	158

## List of Tables

Table	1	Age and gender distribution of mother- and father-headed bereaved families	.....50
Table	2	Sociodemographic indicators of mother- and father-headed bereaved families	.....51
Table	3	Major research questions of the present study	.....55
Table	4	Main categories and their subcategories forming the coding scheme	.....58
Table	5	Agreements and disagreements between two coders, as well as concordance rates for each interview	.....63
Table	6	Agreements and disagreements within one coder (the author), as well as concordance rates for each interview (a selection of interviews coded twice, three months apart)	.....64
Table	7	Description of procedural steps of category development and analysis in FolioVIEWS	.....68
Table	8	Children's statements describing what the loss of their parent meant to them	.....74
Table	9	Reasons that children reported for not wanting to talk about the deceased with friends	.....81
Table	10	Different ways of talking about the deceased reported by family members of mother- and father-headed families at all three time points	.....84
Table	11	Reasons that children reported for not wanting to share feelings with their parent	.....86
Table	12	Communication in terms of Discussing daily life issues and Blowing up at each other, reported by family members of mother- and father-headed families at all three time points	.....87
Table	13	Means and standard deviations of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL Total Score), Perceived Competence Scale (Subscales: Self Worth, Scholastic and Social Competence) and Locus of Control at all three time points for the mother- and father-headed group	.....102

## List of Figures

Figure	1	Multidimensional view on dealing with daily family life after the death of a parent	.....5
Figure	2	Procedure of category development and data analysis	.....53
Figure	3	Changing perspectives on the data, located on the continua issue- versus case-focused and generalized versus concrete	.....61
Figure	4	Estimated means of parents' assessment of children's behavioral and emotional problems at all three time	.....103
Figure	5	Estimated means of children's self reports regarding their perceived self worth at all three time points	.....103



## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examined how widowed families with school-aged children deal with their daily life after the death of a parent, and how this process is similar or different for families who are mother- or father-headed after the loss. The present analysis was part of an ongoing analysis of the data of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study (Silverman & Worden, 1993), a longitudinal study on loss of a parent. A subsample of five mother- and five father-headed bereaved families was selected from the larger sample in order to allow an in-depth analysis of their experiences. The qualitative analyses revealed differences in parental coping patterns that seemed to be gender-specific. The five mothers tended to be more in touch with their children than the fathers, and seemed more likely to adjust their own preferences to their children's needs. They appeared to make a conscious effort to provide continuity and stability for their children. The five fathers, on the other hand, reported that they recognized the importance of continuity only during the second year of bereavement. They further reported gaining a better understanding of their children's needs. However, despite these changes over time, the five fathers in the subsample explored appeared to stay more focused on their own needs than the mothers over the course of the study. However, to assess whether the described coping styles are indeed gender-specific, and especially, to see how the accommodation process may develop over a longer period of time, further examination in future studies is needed.

## GERMAN SUMMARY

In der vorliegenden Arbeit wurde untersucht, wie Familien mit Kindern und Jugendlichen im Alter von 10 bis 18 ihr Alltagsleben nach dem Tod eines Elternteils bewältigen und auf welche Weise Familien, in denen der Vater bzw. die Mutter verstorben ist, sich voneinander unterscheiden. Diese Dissertation war Teil einer laufenden Analyse der Harvard Child Bereavement Study (Silverman & Worden, 1993), einer Längsschnittstudie zum Thema Tod eines Elternteils. Aus diesem Datensatz wurde eine Stichprobe, bestehend aus fünf Familien, in denen die Mutter, und fünf Familien, in denen der Vater verstorben war, ausgewählt. Die qualitativen Analysen ergaben Unterschiede in den Bewältigungsmustern der verwitweten Väter und Mütter, die geschlechtsspezifisch zu sein schienen. Die fünf Mütter aus der untersuchten Stichprobe schienen die Situation ihrer Kinder bewußter als die Väter wahrzunehmen. Weiterhin zeigten sie eine höhere Bereitschaft als die Väter, ihre eigenen Präferenzen an die Bedürfnisse der Kinder anzupassen. Die Mütter schienen bewußte Anstrengungen zu unternehmen, um Kontinuität im Leben ihrer Kinder aufrechtzuerhalten. Die fünf Väter dagegen berichteten, daß sie die Wichtigkeit von Kontinuität für ihre Kinder erst während des zweiten Jahres nach dem Verlust realisierten. Ihrer Einschätzung zufolge hatten sie zu diesem Zeitpunkt ein besseres Verständnis für die Bedürfnisse ihrer Kinder gewonnen. Jedoch blieb der Eindruck, daß die fünf Väter ihren eigenen Bedürfnissen anhaltend mehr Bedeutung zumaßen als die fünf Mütter. In weiterführenden Studien sollte untersucht werden, ob die beschriebenen Bewältigungsstile tatsächlich geschlechtsspezifisch sind. Insbesondere sollte weiterverfolgt werden, wie sich der Anpassungsprozeß über einen längeren Zeitraum entwickelt.

## CURRICULUM VITA

**Kathrin Börner** (\*1970 in Haltern, Germany)

### Education

FREE UNIVERSITY BERLIN, Germany

*Since June 1997*

Doctoral Student with Dr. M. M. Baltes<sup>a</sup>

UNIVERSITY OF TRIER, Germany

*Diplom received in 1996*

(Diploma Thesis: The grieving process and continuing ties to the deceased)

CHRISTIAN ALBRECHTS UNIVERSITY KIEL, Germany

*Vordiplom received in October 1993*

Gesamtschule Wulfen, Dorsten, Germany

*Abitur 1989*

### Practical Experience

HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL, Boston, MA, US

*Since April 1997*

Research on Grief and Bereavement with Dr. P. R. Silverman

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT BOSTON, MA, US

*Since February 1999*

Research on the Transitions from Adolescence to Adulthood

with Dr. R. S. Weiss & Dr. J. Liem

NEW YORK STATE UNIVERSITY AT STONY BROOK, NY, US

*November 1995 to March 1996*

Research on Aging and Loss with Dr. Camille B. Wortman

STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, Palo Alto, CA, US

*July 1994 to October 1994*

Research on Anxiety Disorders with Dr. Walton T. Roth

### Stipends

Promotionsstipendium, Nachwuchsförderungsprogramm, Berlin, Germany

*Since April 1999*

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, Bonn, Germany

*August 1997 to July 1998*

Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, Bonn, Germany

*September 1993 to December 1996*

<sup>a</sup>Since the death of Dr. Margret M. Baltes in January 1999, Dr. Paul B. Baltes and Dr. Jacqui Smith took over the supervision of my dissertation.

