

## I. INTRODUCTION

"For psychological research, there is a need to reflect the centrality of attachment in human development and interpersonal interactions. There is a need to move from a psychology of the individual to a psychology of relationships" (Lyons, 1989, p. 43).

The death of a parent is an experience that most people encounter at some point in life. When a parent dies, it not only has significant consequences for the individual but also for the family as a unit. In daily family life, it is unavoidable that each individual becomes influenced by the needs, reactions, and perceptions of the other family members. Although it would seem obvious that the family plays a central role in the grieving process, research to date has primarily focused on investigating the individual (e.g., Gelcer, 1983; Kissane & Bloch, 1994). Accordingly, the predominant grief models (e.g., Bowlby, 1980; Horowitz, 1983) do not address grief as a family process. Most contributions that are explicitly concerned with grief in the family context stem from clinical observations within the field of family therapy (Shapiro, 1994), focusing on improving coping and communication strategies to help the family accommodate to the loss. Usually, open confrontation and communication with regard to the loss is considered to be helpful (Herz Brown, 1988). Although these clinical experiences offer valuable information, they certainly are no substitute for systematic investigations. It is also questionable to what extent families who seek out professional help are representative of the general population of bereaved families. The few studies that address grief in the family context seem to suffer from crucial limitations. Most of them, for example, did not include a longitudinal perspective that would allow changes over time to be observed. Secondly, hardly any study included a control group of nonbereaved families, which means that there was little means of assessing to what extent phenomena found in bereaved families may have been related to common developmental processes, such as lower cohesion in families with adolescents. The Harvard Child Bereavement Study (e.g., Silverman & Worden, 1992, 1993) was designed to overcome these methodological shortcomings. A subsample of this larger study served as source of secondary analysis for the present dissertation.

Because research clearly shows that reactions to loss can vary significantly from person to person (Boerner & Wortman, 1998), there has been a strong interest in identifying factors that may mediate the grieving process. One aspect that has received great attention is the role of gender in bereavement. Several authors have reported gender effects such as higher illness and mortality rates among widowers (e.g., Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987; Worden & Silverman, 1993), or a more interrupted sense of self among widows (Silverman, 1988). These findings indicate that

gender needs to be taken into consideration, in order to better understand a bereaved person's experience as well as the impact of this experience on other family members. In widowed families with dependent children, it seems self-evident that whether the surviving parent is a mother or a father is a key factor in how these families manage with daily life after the loss. However, little is known about the way in which gender roles affect a family's accommodation to the life changes after such a loss.

Therefore, the main goal of my analysis is to investigate how families deal with their daily life after the death of a parent, and how this process develops during the first two years of bereavement. In this context, I am also interested in the ways in which these patterns are similar or different for mother- and father-headed bereaved families.

Before starting out, it seems worthwhile to reflect on the etymological derivations and current definitions of the terms that are commonly used in the discussion of loss (see Barnhart, 1964; Boerner & Wortman, 1998). The term bereavement is derived from the Latin word *rumpere* (to break, to carry or tear away), and refers to the objective situation of a person who has suffered the loss of someone significant. Grief is derived from Latin *gravare* (to weigh down), and refers to the emotional experience of a number of psychological, behavioral, social, and physical reactions to one's loss. The word mourning is derived from the Latin word *memor* (mindful) (Neilson, 1953). It refers to actions expressive of grief which are shaped by social and cultural mourning practices and expectations. Jeter (1983) commented "as the ancients, people today surviving the death of a family member do feel robbed, weighted down, and are mindful of the past, knowing that life will never be the same" (p. 219).

In the following sections, the focus will be how this experience affects and changes the daily life of bereaved mother- and father-headed families. First, I outline the conceptual frameworks that have stimulated and guided my research. Second, in the method section, I briefly present the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, delineate my methodology, and describe how I proceeded in analyzing the data. Then follows the result section in which the findings are presented. To close, I provide a discussion and perspective on future directions.