

## V. DISCUSSION

The findings presented above shed light on a number of interesting issues, and provide some answers to the questions that had been posed initially (see table 3). At the same time, the findings provoke new questions that I would not have been able to ask before beginning this analysis. For example, it was not apparent from the literature that the differences between mother- and father-headed families with regard to continuity in family life, reflected in parenting styles and ways of establishing a family routine, would appear as such a compelling quality in the data.

As pointed out in the method section, I drew on cues from the literature as well as on the raw data for the conceptualization of interpretive categories. Most of the main categories and some of the subcategories reflected areas of family functioning that were, according to the literature, crucial to the understanding of families. The main category Maintaining continuity and most subcategories, however, were derived directly from the qualitative data. In addition, I used some of the quantitative data assessing family cohesion and outcome for each family member. This means that I was guided by two approaches (the deductive as well as the inductive one), and that I drew on two sources of data (qualitative as well as the quantitative data). The value of joining both was that I could make use of the merit of each approach and source of data, and that, in some instances, they seemed to complement one another.

The central findings that emerged from my data analysis are summarized above (chapter IV., section 9.). In the following sections, I first address the limitations of the present study. Second, I discuss what has been gained by making use of qualitative as well as quantitative data materials. Finally, I try to reconstruct the patterns found in the data by drawing on a number of selected theories that had been discussed in the literature review, and that now seemed to be fruitful in helping understand and interpret the findings.

### 1. Limitations of the Present Study

There were several methodological limitations that are discussed here so that they be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings presented above. Not being able to do data analysis as soon as there is data collection, is considered bad practice by some authors (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss; 1987). Yet, as Weiss (1994) noted "a conspiracy of forces regularly impedes early analysis" (p. 151). In my case, the conspiracy of forces included first of all that I was not around at the time of data collection. Second, it would have been impossible to

participate in data collection and analyze data from whole families interviewed at three time points, in the framework of a dissertation. Therefore, using a large dataset for secondary analysis seemed to be an acceptable compromise.

Unlike most bereavement studies, the Harvard Child Bereavement Study included a control group of nonbereaved families, which could have been a helpful asset to the interpretation of findings from bereaved families. Unfortunately, the focus of the control interviews was different from focus of the bereaved interviews. In my opinion, the usefulness of the control interviews for purposes of comparison with the bereaved group was therefore extremely limited, in the sense that the differences in conducting interviews always would have to be taken into account as one possible explanation for differences between the two groups. Thus, the data materials of the control group was only used as a standard of comparison for the outcome scores of the bereaved group.

Another aspect that is also related to the available database could be considered a limitation from a family systems standpoint. The Harvard Child Bereavement Study allowed me to look at the perspectives of individual family members. Information about the family system then was contained in the statements of individual family members about the other family members, or about family life in general. For example, the findings on family communication were constructed out of the comments of individual family members referring to what the family communication is like. Being able to directly look at the family system as a unit would require a different approach of data collection. One possibility, for instance, would be to observe ongoing family interactions, maybe even to videotape a regular day of daily family life. This approach would allow the chance to witness spontaneous interactions (i.e. family members may forget the camera after a while). In addition, taking into consideration not only the verbal but also the nonverbal interaction seems to provide a more complete picture of the dynamics within the family system, as Bruner (1990) put it: "families without their gestures and some indication of whom they are looking at are like sunsets without color" (p.123). A different line of argument, however, is that a family system still consists of individual family members, and that, grieving the death of a parent is an individual as well as a family process. In this spirit, the Harvard Child Bereavement Study was designed to investigate the consequences of the death of a parent on dependent children with a consideration of their family context.

One major limitation was that I conducted the main parts of data analysis by myself, and not as a member of what Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995) called an "interpretive community". This limited me in the following regards: First, I did not have sufficient resources (funding, personnel) at my disposal to ensure a reliability testing on all necessary levels. For

pragmatic reasons, I was not able to test the reliability of my own segmentation of the interviews, which of course entailed a step of preceding the data by making decisions about the relevance of certain passages. Instead, I was able to provide reliability testing through a second coder only on the level of applying codes from the codebook to marked segments in the interview.

The second problem about conducting the data analysis by myself was that I could not reach the goal of theoretical saturation. Corbin and Strauss (1990) request that the researcher keeps coding data materials until a point of saturation is reached, which means that additional data do no longer change the basic picture of findings. I somewhat reached this point after the ten families that I had selected according to the criteria outlined above. To enrich the analysis, however, I could have added families that were different in certain regards (e.g., families with younger children). The main reason why I stopped after the tenth family was that working on more interviews would simply have exceeded the scope of a dissertation. Yet, it is entirely possible that adding more families would have brought out different or new patterns emerging from the data. Therefore, the findings presented above are not meant to tell a story about how bereaved families in general manage after the death of a parent. Rather, the idea was to, based on few families, investigate what may be experienced by some, and to understand the dynamics involved in this process, in order to expand our insight in the possible range of experiences. This approach follows the logic proposed by Rawlings in the book *Cross Creek*: "A man may learn a great deal of the general from studying the specific, whereas it is impossible to know the specific from studying the general (p. 359).

Another limitation of my data analysis concerns issue of quantification. There are a number of approaches to quantify qualitative findings (e.g., Mayring, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Weiss, 1994). However, finding a meaningful way of handling this analytical step is a fairly complicated endeavor. Quantifying by reporting on the number of responses that was given a certain code, for example, involves the following problems that need to be dealt with. If a subcategory such as Sharing feelings was applied to a particular family more often than to other families, this did not necessarily mean that there had been more sharing feelings in this family. First of all, it is possible that the interviewer of this particular family had rechecked on issues of sharing feelings several times because no one in the family had expressed much about it. Second, some respondents are simply more talkative than others. This means that to assess the role of certain themes in different families, it seems necessary to take into consideration aspects such as how things are said, what the overall context is like, and what the respondent is like. Sometimes, one can tell only out of the context of the interview if a theme is of particular

relevance. For example, all mothers stressed on the importance of continuity. But even this they did in different ways; some repeatedly talked about continuity, others said once, with a lot of emphasis, how important continuity is for their family. Thus, to quantify in a meaningful way, one would have to develop a way of weighing interview statements differently depending on context.

While quantifying my qualitative findings in such a way would have been an option, this idea was not followed up on because the primary purpose of my analysis was the understanding and description of patterns that underlie a family's adaptation. Furthermore, a quantification of the qualitative findings was not really compatible with the approach to the ongoing qualitative analysis conducted on the data of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study. However, the decision not to work on a quantification of the qualitative findings did not imply a rejection of quantitative methods in general. First of all, in the section on family communication, I did quantify by counting how often different ways of talking were reported in the mother or father-headed group because it appeared to be a helpful asset to summarizing this otherwise scattered information. Secondly, I made use of some of the available quantitative measures in order to help interpret the qualitative findings. The next section serves to point out the value of joining qualitative and the quantitative methods, and, in this way, of looking beyond the information that is gained through one source of data.

## **2. Looking Beyond one Source of Data**

What emerged from joining qualitative and quantitative approaches of data analysis? While the quantitative and qualitative data of the present subsumable of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study revealed consistent findings with respect to family members' accommodation to the loss, each data type gave insight in different aspects. The qualitative findings provided the most insightful information about the family system, not explicitly as a separate category, but throughout all the themes. Whenever a family member made any reference to other family members or to the family as a whole, this statement revealed something about the family system, no matter whether it was in the context of communication, continuity, or accommodation. The quantitative findings, then, yielded more explicit information about family members' assessment of individual and family adaptation in the form of ratings on scales.

The validity of findings from standardized measures tend to be questioned to a lesser degree than qualitative findings (Mahoney, 1996). Nevertheless, it seems important to ask what scores on quantitative measures tell us and to realize their limitations. Depression scores (e.g.,

CES-Depression, Radloff, 1977), for instance, only tell us part of the story. Futterman and associates (1990) pointed out that grief often does not include "feelings of worthlessness, the pervasive guilt and hopelessness, or morbid thoughts common to clinical depression (p. 277). Several authors have cautioned that the term depression in the context of grief may pathologize the grieving process (Raphael & Middleton, 1990; Worden & Silverman, 1993). Nevertheless, instead of adding other measures (such as a sadness-scale), depression is generally the main outcome measure in most bereavement studies.

Grief models usually predict elevated depression soon after a loss, and then a decrease of depression symptoms over time. This pattern was confirmed by the depression scores from the present subsample. In contrast, the qualitative findings suggested that many of the surviving parents did not feel that they experienced depression. Instead, they reported deep sadness and distinguished this from depression. Apparently, the depression scale used in this study was not sensitive enough to pick up this fine line between depression and deep sadness. There was also a different tone to how mothers and fathers described their grief, indicating that there was a difference in perception of how they felt (see also Worden & Silverman, 1993). The depression scores of mothers and fathers, however, did not differ. Another issue that could not be detected with the available depression scores was that a decrease in scores to the point where the bereaved group no longer differed from the control group did not necessarily mean that a person had returned "back to normal". Instead, family members clearly stated that they never returned to any sort of "baseline". Thus, if one wanted to rely on quantitative outcome measures, it would be important to choose or develop a measure that is sensitive to the kind of qualitative changes in affective response that emerges from the interview materials.

A further example of the advantage of joining qualitative and quantitative methods can be seen in the context of children's adjustment. On the quantitative measures, parents' as well as children's assessment of children's emotional state and behavioral problems on the different outcome measures were consistent. It was certainly an advantage to have this kind of assessment from both parents and children, indicating that there were more problems among children of father-headed than of mother-headed families. But a number of important aspects were not detected through these scales, such as what the loss meant for family members, or what mothers and fathers found most challenging in terms of single parenting. Looking at the content of worries and concerns, and at the description of what family members felt they had lost not only confirmed that there were crucial differences between mother- and father-headed families, but also showed what constituted these differences. At the same time, these qualitative data also

revealed essential similarities between the two groups in these regards, which would have stayed unrecognized if the assessment had occurred based on the outcome scores alone.

Most importantly, what the available outcome scores (e.g., Child Behavior Checklist; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) could not reveal were aspects of growth<sup>18</sup>. Most family members in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study described having gained something as a result of the ramifications of the loss, or having grown in some way over time. If we understand grief as a transition which involves a potential for growth (Silverman, 1988), then the focus shifts from outcome orientation to the understanding of this transformative process. Nadeau (1998) found that positive meanings constructed by bereaved family members were that the loss had changed them, caused them to reflect on relationships and priorities, and put things into proportion. Similar statements were made throughout the interviews with the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, in the context of talking about personal growth and general changes since the loss. For example, mothers talked about being more independent, fathers about being more involved with the family, and children about feeling more responsible. In a way, constructing positive meaning can be what Harvey et al (1992) called a "central healing force" in adjustment to loss as well as a characteristic of adjustment itself. Insights of this kind can only be gained by looking beyond the surface of outcome measures, and they enable us to expand our knowledge in terms of what possible experiences and processes are. After all, making an effort to understand people's experiences in greater depth, instead of reducing the complex implications of loss to outcome scores of adjustment, also seems to be a more respectful approach to understanding one of the most challenging experiences that we all encounter at some point in our lives.

### **3. Dealing with family life after the loss: Reconstruction of findings in terms of selected theories**

Both tentative answers and questions that emerged from the findings will be discussed on the background of related conceptual ideas and theories presented in the theory section. In Maxwell's terms (1996), examining one's findings in the context of existing theoretical thought can serve the following purposes:

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<sup>18</sup>This is not necessarily a critique of quantitative outcome scores per se. Information about growth could possibly be derived from a different set of outcome measures. Deeper insights into aspects of growth, however, may best be obtained by a combination of measurement types such as the use of open-ended as well as standardized questions.

"A useful theory illuminates what you are seeing in your research. It draws your attention to particular events or phenomena and sheds light on relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed or be misunderstood".....It "gives you a framework for making sense of what you see. Particular pieces of data that otherwise might seem unconnected or irrelevant to one another or to your research questions can be related by fitting them into the theory. The concepts of the existing theory are the "coat hooks" in the closet; they provide places to "hang" the data, showing their relationship to other data" (p. 33).

However, Maxwell also emphasizes that "no theory will accommodate all data equally well; a theory that neatly organizes some data will leave other data disheveled and lying on the floor, with no place to hang them" (p. 33). For this reason, a number of different theoretical formulations are brought into this discussion, instead of trying to fit all findings into one comprehensive model.

In chapter II, these theoretical orientations were reviewed separately, because they each highlight different dimensions of the accommodation process. However, many of the basic ideas and concepts overlap across these dimensions (see figure 1 depicting a multidimensional view of dealing with daily life after parental loss; introduction to chapter II., p. 5). What also becomes apparent throughout areas is the life-span notion of contextualism. While the accommodation to a loss and the resulting life changes is an individual process, the context in which the individual is embedded, the family and social surrounding, is crucial to the course of this process. Furthermore, approaches to coping as well as recent work on bereavement emphasize the idea that, next to coping with the loss, there is a daily life that needs to be dealt with. Both coping and family theory address the fact that families come to the the loss-event with a set of resources, and that the loss triggers a process of losing and rebuilding, activating, or compensating of family resources. Finally lifespan, coping, and relational theory point to the influences of the larger cultural context, specifically the issue of gender roles and related developmental goals, and of the gain-loss dynamics that can be involved for each person at different points in the accommodation process.

To address each of these aspects in more detail, the following sections draw on the notion of the two coping modes in order to frame the grieving process, on the conservation of resources- and family stress-model to discuss the losing and rebuilding of family resources, and on the model of selective optimization with compensation to explain the dynamics underlying the issue of continuity. The last section, I will devote to the argument that the most apparent differences between mother- and father-headed families were mainly due to differences in the development of men and women as delineated by relational theory.

### *3.1 How to frame the grieving process: A dual-track of coping*

The question of how to frame the grieving process has been an ongoing debate among bereavement researchers for several decades (e.g., Bowlby, 1980; Horowitz, 1983; Parkes, 1971; Shapiro, 1994; Silverman, 1966; 2000; Stroebe, 1997; Wortman & Silver, 1989). While most researchers to date agree that the grieving process does not occur through a certain order of stages, there are still quite a few authors who hold on to the concept of what they call phases rather than stages. For example, Rando (1993) conceived the grieving process as a series of three basic phases through which the individual progresses: avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation. Although she emphasized that these phases are considered to be flexible and fluent, she nevertheless assumed an order in which they are likely to occur. What is the purpose of defining phases, if they are not meant to occur as phases? To me, this is just the traditional model in a disguised form because it still assumes that grief work (confrontation) is a core process that has to happen in a phase without moments of avoidance and before a state of accommodation can be reached. Rando's proposal also focuses on the experience of the individual. She does not take into account how the course of this process may be influenced by, or have an influence on, one's immediate surrounding (e.g., other family members and the family as a unit).

Coping patterns in the subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study examined in the present analysis did not reflect phases. Instead, there was some indication that opposing coping efforts may have occurred at the same time (e.g., individuals who reported sharing memories about the deceased also talked about feeling relieved by distraction). Strategies representing grief work (e.g., sharing feelings of grief) were only one among many of the strategies reported. This lends support to the models that propose at least a dual-track of coping (e.g., Heckhausen & Schulz; Horowitz, 1981; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Stroebe & Schut, 1999), and implies that avoidance is not necessarily the opposite of grief work and that avoidance, in some instances, might not be maladaptive (see also Bonanno, Keltner, Holen, & Horowitz, 1995).

My impression is that as a result of insisting on the idea of adaptation in the form of phases, bereavement research has suffered from an overfocus on grief and on the individual. Fortunately, the family perspective forces us to see that grief is only one of many issues to face, that a family needs to keep going, and that children need to be taken care of. There is a lot more to deal with than just grief. Dealing with daily life after the loss is at least as big of a task (Silverman, 2000). Theoretical formulations such as the two coping modes (e.g., Lazarus, 1993; Stroebe & Schut, 1999) alert us to this issue, in the sense that the concept of restoration-oriented



coping is thought of as enabling a person to face the daily life issues. A similar perspective is suggested in the theory of primary and secondary control presented by Heckhausen and Schulz (e.g., 1995). They argue that strategies of secondary control work in the service of primary control, so that individuals can keep up their ability to act.

The dual-track notion also seems to provide a more fitting framework for the understanding of family communication than the approach that labels communication patterns as either being open or not open. In the family therapy literature, being able to talk about grief, the loss experience, or other problematic topics is referred to as "open communication", and this is usually considered to be necessary for "healthy adjustment" (Bowen, 1976; Davies, Spinetta & Martinson, 1986; Davies et al., 1995; Herz-Brown, 1988). But what exactly does it mean to have "open" or "not open" communication? The bottom line is that in all of the families in the subsample I explored, sharing feelings with regard to the loss appeared to be a problem. This is consistent with findings reported by Silverman, Weiner, & El Ad (1995) showing that even in families who appeared more open, not talking about the loss occurred as an attempt to protect each other's feelings. Considering that talking about the loss and loss-related topics seemed to some extent blocked in all families of the present subsample, the call for "open" communication appears to be a rather unrealistic expectation for the first two years of bereavement.

Furthermore, the conceptualization of open and closed communication covers up the insight that talking about the deceased can be done in a problem-focused mode (e.g., talking about the loss) as well as in an emotion-focused mode (e.g., jokingly remembering the deceased's peculiar sides), and that one is not necessarily more open or closed than the other. Engaging more in the use of humor, in talking about what the deceased would do, or in the use of the deceased as "moral rock" may at times be more helpful than trying to talk about feelings. In fact, the attempt to force this level of talking appeared to be one of the reasons why children sometimes blocked the family communication. In the same way, they perceived social support as unhelpful and intrusive when adults tried to get them to talk about their feelings. This pattern suggests that sharing feelings is a very adult level of talking, and that it was not the language these children needed or could deal with at this time of their lives.

Another point in support of the idea that developmental aspects play a crucial role in this context, was that those children who were more open to this way of sharing were also the oldest in the group. Thus, the role of sharing feelings might have been different for families with late adolescent children. What seems likely to apply to most families at any point in the life course, however, is that forcing ways of talking that are clearly blocked may backfire in the sense that family members shut down the communication even more. Instead, trying to find ways of

talking that don't exceed what one can take at a certain time, which means to oscillate between loss- and restoration-oriented modes of talking, may help to keep the topic open within the family, or to open it up over time, so that after a while more sensitive areas may be touched as well. Accordingly, it seems important to be creative in developing ways of talking about the deceased that may work for a specific family, with children of a certain age, at a certain time.

Taken together, I propose that ways of thinking that are created by both stage or phase models should be discarded, and instead the grieving process should be seen as evolving along the lines of a dual-track. The adaptiveness of coping strategies, then, depends on the particular contextual influences that affect the current family life. My impression from the data is that the families who succeeded in striking a balance between the two coping modes were less "in trouble" than those who were either mainly loss- or restoration-oriented in their basic coping-orientation. Because I did not code for the two coping modes, this proposal could not be tested as a part of my analysis. However, I do think that it would be a contribution of future research to investigate the use and interplay of the two modes and their adaptiveness in the context of bereavement.

A related issue of interest would be to investigate individual as well as family processes in this regard. Framing coping with loss as a collaborative family process, a number of family types or patterns seem possible. Some families, for example, may show a certain level of synchrony with respect to their balance of coping. Others may have more of a teamwork style, which means that different family members take over different coping tasks, depending on their current resources and state of mind. A possible picture, in this case, would be that some family members find it easier to confront the loss-oriented part (e.g., talking about the loss), while others have more resources to engage in restoration-oriented strategies (e.g., organizing the household), and that, in this way, the family works as a collaborative unit. Of course, another question to be addressed here would be, whether or not this kind of sharing "coping responsibilities" has certain costs for individual members in the long run.

In terms of a operationalization of the two coping modes, it seems important to focus on the content of a particular activity. For example, talking to the deceased as a means of constructing a continuing connection with the deceased (Silverman & Nickman, 1996), can be both loss- and restoration-oriented. When a bereaved individual talks to the deceased about past times, or about what it would be like to be back together, the coping orientation is more loss-focused. However, when the inner dialogue with the deceased addresses issues of guidance to help the bereaved move on with the present or future daily life, it reflects a restoration-oriented effort. In a similar vein, the family communication about the deceased can be both, loss- and

restoration-focused, depending on the content of the conversation. Keeping this in mind, future studies could make use of the dialectic between a deductive and inductive approach to data collection, by examining the use of both coping modes, and, at the same time, asking open questions that allow the discovery of new constellations or additional characterizations of these modes in a particular context.

### *3.2 Losing and rebuilding family resources: The model of conservation of resources and family theory*

According to family theory, the use of a certain constellation of family resources is routinized by the family system (Patterson & McCubbin, 1983). This routinization is put out of balance through resource loss, which, according to the model of conservation of resources (e.g., Hobfoll, 1998), is what causes stress. In all families the death involved a great resource loss. This was especially the case for those families where the deceased had been in charge of the emotional side of family life. In many cases, the mother had this role in the family. This, then, was probably one of the reasons why the cohesion level in the father-headed group of the present subsample appeared to drop during the first year of bereavement. The person who had been in charge of creating the connectedness was gone in these families. This again reminds us that the question of what is lost, or the loss of a way of life (Silverman, 1988) is a key issue in what families face after a loss.

Family cohesion seems to constitute one of the most basic family resources because it is a necessary condition resource for the family to work as a system. This means that a decrease in cohesion after the death of a parent implies the additional loss of a resource that is essential for family functioning. However, lower cohesion in itself does not necessarily trigger stress. While the families with lower cohesion (father-headed families) were also the ones where children seemed to have a more difficult time, a certain decrease in cohesion occurred in all ten families over the period of the study. Olson and associates (1983) found that cohesion tends to be generally lower among families with adolescent children, and concluded that this reflects the effort of adolescents to differentiate themselves from the family and try to carve out a life style and identity of their own. Accordingly, the mothers in the subsample that I explored did not see the decrease in perceived closeness as a source of concern. This suggests that adolescents' spreading out only causes serious worries if this occurs in a family that is already threatened through a pile-up of resource loss (Patterson & McCubbin, 1983), or a "depletion of resources" (Hobfoll, 1989), and that it is the drastic drop in cohesion, as occurred in father-headed families, that should be a reason for concern. What seems to put a family at risk, in this case, is the

dynamic that a lack of resources tends to lead to further resource loss, which can result in a loss spiral (Hobfoll, 1998), if the family does not succeed in activating or acquiring compensatory resources.

There obviously is a point at which not everything can take place within the nuclear family and at which it may be more realistic to try to rely on resources outside the family, instead of insisting on what the surviving parent may not be able to give, or on what the family as a whole may not be able to take at a certain time. If this point is reached, resources that were available before but not used must be activated or new resources need to be acquired (Hobfoll, 1998). It seems that the first was the case for the mothers, and the latter for the fathers in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study. While mothers were used to drawing on resources of support from the outside, fathers had to gradually learn this over the two year period of the study. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that men rely less on friends for support than do women, and that they tend to lean mainly on their wives (e.g., Levinson, 1978; Weiss, 1990).

The fact that the fathers in the subsample I explored started dating soon after the death of their wife may be interpreted as an attempt to rebuild or replace lost resources. Once they had a new partner, these fathers felt they were managing much better. It does not seem, however, that this was the case just because the loss of the wife as source of support was compensated by a girlfriend. Rather, their increasing ability to mobilize support in general appeared to have a positive effect on adjustment because it seemed to be part of a general striving towards a rebuilding of resources or, in the terms of family stress theory, expanding resources in order to adjust to the new situation. Interestingly, there are several studies on "lone fathers" (divorced fathers who have custody for their children) suggesting that lone fathers tend to be more integrated socially and have better working support systems than do married fathers (e.g., Hanson, 1981; Orthner, Brown, & Ferguson, 1976). O'Brien (1987) found in a similar study that lone fathers were twice as likely as married men to feel that friends were particularly important to them.

These findings and the patterns found in the present study suggest that, although married men tend to have less sources of support than married women, which can result in a rather isolated state after any kind of partner loss, they are likely to learn how to establish support systems once they are forced to do so. In Hobfoll's terms, the loss of important resources enacts a gain cycle, because attention is drawn to the need to protect, expand, and replace resources. For the fathers in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, this means that they invested in compensating for some of the resource loss that they experienced through the

death of their spouse by starting to date, as well as by generally expanding their social support systems. It would be interesting to see if, in the long run, these newly gained resources become part of a routinized constellation of resources that are maybe not always used but kept in the repertoire, to prevent a possible depletion of resources in the future. This raises the question if an experience that involves significant resource loss can cause a basic change in a person's need for, or investment in the protection of his or her resources. The hypothesis to examine, then, would be that the general tendency to ensure a state of "resource surplus" (Hobfoll, 1998) increases as a result of the loss experience.

### *3.3 Continuity in family life: Selective optimization and compensation*

The importance of continuity in the wake of the many changes and transitions over the life span has been a longstanding notion in developmental psychology (Atchley, 1977, 1991; Kagan, 1980; Wohlwill, 1973). In fact, Cohler (1982) proposed a Life Narrative Model, in which the need to create a coherent life account is considered a basic human need or driving force. Thus, in the context of continuity theory, it makes sense that, for children who have just experienced a great deal of disruption through the death of a parent, a lack of continuity in family life would make their adjustment to the loss and its ramifications even more difficult. Moreover, one would assume that bereaved parents' behaviors are also affected by their own need for continuity.

While this may explain why the theme Maintaining continuity in family life becomes so crucial in differentiating how families deal with their daily life after the loss, it does not help us understand why mother- and father-headed families were so different in this regard. Maybe we have to ask how they went about creating continuity, and why mothers seemed to be more successful with their efforts than fathers. Baltes & Baltes' theory of Selection and Optimization with Compensation (SOC; e.g., 1990; Freund & Baltes, in press) seems to be a good interpretative framework to help look at this question. Concrete examples of SOC-processes and their systemic linkages can be found in the coping efforts and goals of mother- and father-headed families. Before the loss, focusing on survival was the general priority in both mother- and father-headed families, and this consistent effort seemed to be helpful in coping with the situation of a long illness and impending death. After the loss, the coping orientation assumed by mothers and fathers appeared to diverge. Mothers selectively focused on maintaining stability for their children. They tried to optimize this effort, and to compensate for the loss and the resulting disruption of continuity by mobilizing support, and by adopting a strongly child-centered parenting style. These strategies were used pretty consistently to promote continuity in daily family life.

Unlike mothers, the fathers in the subsample that was explored did not selectively focus on stability in home life. In general, they approached their new life less selectively than did mothers, because they tried to attend to their own needs as well as to the children's, without intending to make a sacrifice on either side. To promote the family situation, they engaged in some optimization and compensation. For instance, they tried to learn the household tasks that were new to them, and to mobilize support. This learning process took some time, probably because fathers simply had more areas in their role as single parent that needed to be optimized than did mothers. But, after all, those areas in which they improved were also the ones that made the situation a little better for all family members (e.g., the improved communication with their children). However, while these efforts were investments in family life, another means of compensation, for example the fathers' dating situation, reflected a parent-centered parenting style, because it was seemingly geared toward the father's priorities, and appeared to occur at the cost of their children's needs.

Thus, both groups of parents made use of all three SOC-strategies, but mothers used them more consistently to reach the goal of continuity than did fathers. It makes sense that this consistent use of the SOC-components would work better, considering that they are assumed to be interrelated and to operate dynamically as a unit, and that one component is thought to facilitate the other. Mothers engaged in all three components with the same underlying goal - continuity in family life. Fathers engaged in all three of them with different, partially opposing or counteracting goals, which obviously created problems for themselves as much as for the family.

Keeping in mind the concept of family systems, it would be interesting to more explicitly investigate how this system, after a major loss, works with the strategies selection, optimization, and compensation. One could, for example, examine to what extent the surviving family members have a shared understanding regarding their resources and goal structure, and when to engage in either of the SOC-processes (Ballets & Carstensen, 1998). As suggested in the context of the dual-track model (e.g., Stroebe & Schut, 1999), another question is whether coping with loss can also constitute a shared task, in the sense that each family member takes care of certain strategies (e.g., one family member is primarily responsible for selective, and another for compensative processes), and what the gain-loss dynamics resulting from this kind of responsibility sharing may be like.

While the SOC-model helps to clarify why some of the surviving parents were more successful in maintaining continuity in family life, a question that remains is why fathers and mothers seemed to be aiming at different aspects of continuity. Atchley (1991) suggested that individuals select certain priorities so that *continuity of the self* can be reached. If continuity of

the self was the goal, then it seems that for mothers, this meant aiming at continuity in family life, whereas for fathers, continuity of self meant following up on personal interests that were not necessarily family related.

### *3.4 Parenting styles and developmental goals: Relational theory*

While the phenomenon that fathers appeared to prioritize in terms of their own needs cannot be explained by coping theory, a relational and developmental perspective renders helpful cues. As outlined above, relational theory postulates that men typically aim at autonomy as a developmental step beyond connection, whereas women's sense of self tends to be organized around developing and maintaining relationships (Gilligan, 1993; Miller, 1997; Silverman, 1988). If the developmental goal for men is to reach a state of autonomy, then this would naturally be the "pull" that the fathers in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study felt, and it makes perfect sense that they gave preference to their own aspirations. At least, it seems that they would have to make a very profound shift in order to grow into a more nurturing role that, at times, favors the children's well being, and requires a certain degree of self-sacrifice from the parent.

Based on the notion that the nature of dependency and autonomy is not necessarily gender-related, but that these features transform over the life span in both men and women (e.g., Baltes & Silverberg, 1994; Guisinger & Blatt, 1993), one would expect that the balance between these two qualities shifts when contextual conditions require it. However, the findings from the present analysis suggest that, at least during the time frame of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, this shift in balance between dependency and autonomy did not take place among the five surviving fathers. Similar findings were reported by Ehrensaft (1995) who interviewed a group of parents who had made a choice to participate equally in child care activities. Although equal childcare had been the intention, mothers still tended to conceptualize their children as a part of themselves, and to think and worry about them constantly. Fathers, although equally proficient and experienced in the care of their children, appeared more easily able to create boundaries between self and child than their wives. This was the case even in families where women had demanding paid employment outside the house. Ehrensaft concluded from these findings that men maintain separateness between the self and the other more than do women.

The notion that these differences in the construction of the self are still very prevalent is reflected in a literature review by Lupton & Barclay (1997) who reported that many of the publications on masculinity neglect the topic of fatherhood (e.g., Connell, 1987, 1995; Mac an Ghail, 1996; Morgan, 1992). This serves to demonstrate that for many academics who have

written about masculinity, issues of schooling, work, and sexual activity seem more central to masculinity than the experience of fatherhood. The authors concluded from their review that men are generally encouraged to construct their self as males through their work role, as opposed to being involved in family issues. This would also explain why the fathers in the present subsample tended to adopt a more administrative style when structuring the daily family routine. It seems that they simply handled home life in the one way that was most familiar to them, which was organizing a work situation.

Thus, the framework of developmental goals over a life-time appeared to determine more strongly how these men and women dealt with their situation, than the extent to which they had to learn new skills or get used to a new task. But the phenomenon that fathers often did not seem to act on the insights of what their children needed, and instead followed up on their own needs, still remains baffling. Their behavior suggests that they were able to block out what they reported to know about their children's needs, in order to move on to a different area of life. The gender literature refers to this as the ability to compartmentalize between different aspects of life. McMahon (1995) reported from a study with Canadian parents that, compared to their husband, even those women who worked full-time thought of parenthood as involving greater participation in domestic work, child care duties, feelings of responsibility, and a different special awareness of their children.

"Men and women may both be parents, I was told, but they act, think, and feel differently as parents (p. 234)...Men could potentially learn to behave like involved parents, but they did not feel or think like mothers....Indicative of their male partners' different consciousness, several women pointed out, was their ability to compartmentalize and segregate parts of themselves and their lives in ways women felt they did not, or could not, do" (p. 251).

Similarly, in his book on the emotional and social life of men who do well at work, Weiss (1990) tells the story of men who use compartmentalization as a key coping strategy in dealing with the different demands of work, family, and other areas of life. These men relied on their ability to compartmentalize in order to manage these different demands, especially if one tended to interfere with the other (e.g., not bringing work worries home or vice versa). They also talked about the fact that their wives could not and did not want to compartmentalize their lives in this fashion. Thus, the men studied by Weiss themselves mentioned the issue of gender differences with regard to compartmentalization because it was a source of friction within their partnership or marriage.

If the fathers in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study compartmentalized to an extent similar to the men in Weiss' study, it makes sense that they were



able to block out what they knew about their children's needs, while going off in order to fulfil their own needs. Compartmentalization as a coping strategy may be well suited to an administrative role at work, because this strategy may make the organization of a work surrounding more efficient. It may also serve well in a life course that aims at a state of separation and independence. However, the habit to compartmentalize appears to be rather incompatible with a nurturing role as primary caretaker of dependent children. Thus, for the fathers in the present subsample, assuming the role of single parent seemed to require not only a shift in terms of their developmental goals but also with regard to the corresponding coping strategies.

#### **4. Concluding Thoughts and Outlook**

The present analysis of a subsample of ten families from the Harvard Child Bereavement Study began with three central research questions (see table 3). The findings regarding these questions have been discussed at length above. There are several directions that future research could take to further examine these questions.

First of all, to be able to assess whether the different patterns found in mother- and father-headed families actually reflect gender differences, we would need to look at these trends in a larger population. Keeping in mind the context within which the families in the subsample that I explored lived at the time of the interviews, there may be a number of other factors that contributed to the reported patterns and developments. For instance, factors such as the point of the family life cycle at which the loss occurred, the age and gender of the children, or the nature of death are likely to be influential as well. Thus, the findings discussed above point to the importance of examining whether similar trends can also be observed in other family constellations. For example, bereaved fathers who are left with younger children may be more likely to involve the new partner in daily family life than were the fathers in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study. At least, the urgency of having another adult to share the caretaking responsibilities with is more obvious with younger children. It is also possible that the lack of an older daughter may force a father to adopt a more nurturing role, and that an oldest son may consequently not feel the same or a different kind of burden than did the oldest daughters in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study. A related issue is the role of children's gender in this context. There is some evidence indicating that girls show a greater capacity for empathy than do boys (Cosse, 1992; Gilligan, 1993; Jordan, 1997). The question raised is whether this difference contributes a significant aspect so that

families with a majority girls are in a better shape to ensure that everyone's needs are considered compared to families consisting primarily of boys. Finally, gender may have a different impact if a family had to deal with the immense shock of a sudden loss, as opposed to dealing with an anticipated loss or with the exhaustion that often follows the time of a lengthy illness prior to death.

Another important task for future research would be to design longitudinal studies with a longer time frame that show what adjustment looks like further down the road. An assessment of outcome measures based on the Harvard Child Bereavement Study was limited to its two year time frame. It is an open question in the literature how long after the death of a parent we should expect to observe the full implications or consequences of such a loss. But if there are significant underlying problems in terms of family members' accommodation process, they may only come to the surface later than two years postloss. In fact, it seems that both negative and positive developments, reflecting the dynamics of gain and loss, can only be assessed with a follow up after several years. For example, while the data suggest that the child-centered approach to parenting corresponds more to the children's needs after the loss than the parent-centered approach, it remains unclear what this means for the mothers in the long run. One question that needs to be raised in this context, then, is whether there may be long-term costs for these mothers' development as a result of their strong focus on the children's needs. For the fathers in the subsample that I explored, changes in parenting style may have occurred much later on in the process of accommodation. An alternative way of looking at the data might be that during the duration of the study, the fathers had just reached the stage of gaining a better understanding of their children, and that implementing these insights into action, and adjusting their goals and coping styles to this new situation took simply longer than two years. This suggests that the gain-loss dynamic resulting from the implications of the loss could change completely over time and with a changing context.

While it is certainly important to understand what may underlie the differences between mothers' and fathers' ways of dealing with single parenting, the main conclusion to be drawn from this analysis cannot be that mother- or father-headed bereaved families necessarily deal with the loss in one way or the other. As pointed out above, this kind of conclusion would require a much larger sample and one that included different types of families who experienced a loss under various circumstances. It would also require examining the accommodation process over an extensive period of time.

What can be derived from the reported findings though is that certain patterns and family dynamics seem to be more or less problematic, and that certain patterns may more likely be

found in father- than in mother-headed families or vice versa. For example, we may note that maintaining continuity, in the present subsample of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, was more of a problem in father-headed families. The important notion, however, should be that continuity seems to be very crucial to family functioning, that stability is something that may be difficult to establish in some bereaved families, and that there is some likelihood that father-headed families will struggle more with this than mother-headed families. A similar argument can be made with regard to communication patterns in bereaved families. In father-headed families, the daily life talk between surviving parents and children needed to be newly established, because children had been talking more to their mothers before the loss. While this is most likely the case in families with a traditional role structure, there obviously are families where this constellation is different, and a child may have a more regular and close communication with the father. Again, these findings should not lead us to conclude that either group necessarily will deal with a specific set of problems. But alert us to the issues at hand: that it takes time and effort to build up the daily life communication if this way of talking between parent and child was not practiced before.

In this way, the findings reported above serve to give an idea about the issues that we should at least be alert to, the questions that a person who tries to help (professionally or privately) may want to bring up, and the areas that clearly should be encouraged as part of an intervention. In particular, the findings on continuity and communication, suggest that it is important to build up a frame offering stability within which affect can be handled. Some families may need help in order to achieve this, others not. In the subsample that I explored, it posed more of a problem for father- than for mother-headed families. But the main point is that, for children, safety and stability seems to be a primary need after the loss of a parent. Therefore, the foremost priority should be on creating the safety frame that then allows or facilitates dealing with the grief itself, instead of focusing on the expression of grief which traditional grief models suggest. In this spirit, a final direction for the study of grief in a family context should adopt a multidimensional view of dealing with daily life after a major loss (see figure 1) that acknowledges and explores the interplay of various coping modes as well as of developmental needs and goals that may exist within each individual as well as within the family as a system.