

Accessing Mother Within A Study of Midlife Daughters' Use of Maternal Belongings in Mourning

This qualitative study, using a phenomenological approach explored the use of physical objects (maternal possessions) in mourning by midlife daughters after their mother's expected deaths. This facilitated the acquisition of a deeper understanding and a greater knowledge of the daughters' intentions and their lived experience. The study questions were: 1) How do midlife daughters describe their use of objects in their mourning process? 2) Is there a role that physical objects serve in an internalization process? Twelve midlife women participated in in-depth interviews which were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. In the analysis, particular attention was directed toward understanding object descriptions and meanings. The analysis revealed three broad thematic categories: 1) overarching themes related to object use 2) relational themes related to object use and 3) internalization themes related to object use. The third broad category of internalization themes will be discussed herein. It is suggested that object use in mourning assists daughters in their construction of an internalized relatedness with their deceased mother through a psychodynamic understanding of introjected maternal dimensions and a process of maternal identification.

The loss of a loved one challenges the emotional frontiers of any person's experience. For mid-life daughters whose mothers have died, this challenging journey of loss is often a journey of substantial sadness, with daughters articulating being dramatically changed by their mother's deaths (Lutovich, 2002; Edelman, 1994). For some time, moving forward with life may be difficult, as these women negotiate the shadows of their sorrows.

In an effort to cope with this emotional turmoil, mourners may embark on a creative search for solace in physical objects (things) that belonged to the deceased with specific maternal belongings becoming increasingly important. The significance and origins of interest in physical objects is

worthy of investigative inquiry, as very little is known about this behaviour, yet evidence of mourners reaching to and finding comfort in the belongings of their deceased abounds.

Parental mourning and gender

The scope of this exploration was limited to adult female participants as there was substantiating empirical evidence that males and females mourn differently (Moss, Rubinstein, and Moss, 1997; Stroebe, 1998; McGoldrick, 2004). Miriam Moss et al. (1993) adds to our understanding by defining female maternal bereavement as marked by the central dynamics of holding on and letting go. The research suggests that daughters do “hold on” (13) to their deceased mothers as evidenced by the existence of comforting thoughts/memories and the continuation of internalized interactions. Substantiating the female grief experience as requiring the formation of a internalized maternal presence, Pamela Deitrich et al. (1999) highlighted maternal loss as representing the loss of a relationship that had unique meaning for daughters since so much of a daughter’s personal development was profoundly and uniquely shaped by this first intimate relationship (Gilligan, 1982; Chodorow, 1978). Thus, for these women the “formation of their mothers as an ongoing presence in their lives constituted the full work of mourning as the women rebuilt their inner worlds and continued on with their own development” (93). Thus we see here, women’s experience of parental bereavement as being more intensely shaped by a need for continuing ties and inner relatedness. These studies suggest ongoing internal relatedness as crucial to female mourning, and it is suggested that the use of maternal objects may facilitate this inner maternal transformation.

Physical object use

Theoretical understandings of the use of objects in mourning can be obtained by reviewing the writings of Vamik Volkan (1981) and Donald Winnicott (1971). Volkan (1981) was the first to identify the phenomenon wherein physical objects of the deceased became significant to mourners and coined his own theoretical term “linking objects” in his quest for meaning and understanding of this behaviour. According to Volkan (1981) the use of objects was often a harbinger of a complicated mourning process. He maintained that the adoption of a linking object served to keep what was a complicated grief process, frozen in an unresolved state, while at the same time the object protected the mourner from a massive depressive episode.

In contrast, the writings of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) suggest that the use of objects in mourning may be linked with children’s acquisition of “transitional objects” in their early life. Transitional objects are those possessions that young children choose to attach themselves to, and are usually secured at the point in time of their early development when mother is less available at the initiation of their states of separateness i.e. teddy bears,

blankets. It could be suggested that the use of physical objects in mourning may in some way be indicative of a regression that is summoning patterns set in infancy. As Winnicott (1971) conveyed, “a need for a specific object or a behavior pattern that started at a very early date may reappear at a later age when deprivation threatens” (232). Using the thoughts detailed above, previous understandings of object use in mourning situate the behaviour as either a harbinger of a complicated mourning process or as a regression to patterns set in early life.

Other understandings are offered by anthropologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981). Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1981) conducted extensive research related to understanding people’s attachment to things. While this study did not incorporate a mourning context, it did look extensively at the meaning of special things to people and the interplay between domestic symbols and the self. Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1981) found that individuals repeatedly found meaning in the objects that surrounded them with most of their participants cherishing at least one object because it reminded them of a close relative. Photographs in particular were items that were identified repeatedly for their significance in the lives of the individuals in their study. They state: “because they bear the actual image of a departed kin, they can acquire an almost mystical identification with the deceased person” (69). Here the researchers suggest the importance of photographs to the kin of the departed for the processes of identification. This idea was re-iterated by Deitrich et al. (1999) wherein the use of “*remembrances*” (89) was mentioned as a means by which the daughters kept their mothers near. Physical objects thus served to assist the daughter in maintaining affiliation, a vital affiliation that reflected a “strong sense of continued need for identification with and attachment to mother” (89).

Inese Wheeler’s descriptive study (1999) looked at the function of linking objects for bereaved parents. The majority of her study’s respondents reported having some kind of linking object that assisted them in their bereavement. “Seventy-eight percent of the parents reported one or more objects, with eighty-six percent of females reporting objects” (292). Here the presence of linking objects was evidenced as a response to bereavement when faced with the loss of a child, with female parents in particular using objects in grief. How these objects were used was also assessed in this study. Wheeler (1999) concluded that bereaved parents often had the object centrally located and interacted with their objects intimately. The study demonstrated that “the parent’s evaluation of their objects was more positive than negative, with parents strongly identifying the object made them feel connected with the deceased child” (295).

In summary, previous literature has defined the use of objects in mourning as suggestive of complicated mourning (Volkan, 1981), a return to regressive patterns set in early childhood (Winnicott, 1971) and/or facilitative of an internal connection or identification with the deceased (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981;

Deitrich et al. 1999; Wheeler, 1999) with women, in general, being more likely to access object use (Wheeler, 1999). However, the subjective experience of object use in mourning by midlife daughters who have lost their mother has not been described and researched previously.

The specific research questions for this study were:

1. How do midlife daughters describe their use of physical objects in their mourning process?
2. Is there a role that physical objects serve in an internalization process?

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover and explore the unique and common understandings of women in regard to their use of physical objects in their mourning experiences after the expected death of their mothers. Assuming an interpretive phenomenological approach, knowledge of the lived experience of these individuals and their intentions within their mourning processes was sought. Phenomenological methodology was used to engage participants, as it promotes reflection and explication of the participants' lived experience (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). This methodology allows for a description of the meaning of the lived experience, (in this case the use of objects in maternal mourning) through the shared essences among participants. This method then uses language to interpret the connotations of the participants' experiences.

Sample

The sample was a maximum variation sample consisting of 12 mid-life women. These women self-identified their interest in participating in the study from recruitment flyers posted in the waiting areas of two local counseling centers and a regional cancer center. In keeping with the study's request for mid-life participants, the participants ranged in age from 39-60 years of age with a mean age of 48 years. The mean age of the mothers at the time of their deaths was 74 years, with a range of 57-93 years. On average, the participants' mothers had been deceased for six years with a range of two to twelve years at the time of the study.

The socio-economic status of the participants was broadly distributed. Of the twelve participants, three identified themselves as being upper-middle class, five identified themselves as middle class, and four identified themselves as living in poverty. There was little racial and sexual diversity within the sample, with all twelve participants identifying themselves as Caucasian. Eleven of the participants identified as heterosexual, with one participant identifying herself as lesbian. The marital status of the participants included six participants who were currently single, five who identified themselves as married, and one was living common-law.

Data collection and analysis

All the interviews were conducted in the participant's homes at their convenience. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber. Each transcript was then independently reviewed and coded by the authors to determine key concepts and/or themes emerging from the data. The next step in the analysis involved a meeting of the researchers to compare and contrast their independent coding, culminating in a consensus that informed the development of the coding template. Emergent themes were identified and highlighted along with expressive quotes that were exemplary in their content. The techniques of immersion and crystallization as detailed by Benjamin Crabtree and William Miller (1999) were used throughout the analysis. Theme saturation was achieved by the twelfth interview. The data was managed through the transfer of information onto chart paper enhanced by colored markers which hi-lighted transcript data, narrative data, identified objects, meanings and all other relevant information. This facilitated the easy recognition of themes as the data was visually present simultaneously.

Findings

Description of identified objects

An initial analysis of the transcribed data revealed the specific objects of mourning that the daughters identified. Physical objects that were repeatedly mentioned for their significance to mourning included: maternal jewelry, photographs, maternal clothing, crocheted/knitted articles, furniture, blankets, china/figurines, food-related objects (including cooking implements, food objects connected to special events and mealtime rituals) and mourning artifacts i.e. Christian crosses. These items proved to be the broad object-specific categorizations that were used in the initial construction of a template to organize and identify the emerging thematic categories.

From these broad categories, repeating themes and understandings emerged. Through a line-by-line analysis, and a member-checking process (Crabtree and Miller, 1999), categories and condensed template structures were constructed, which more comprehensively described the meanings identified. The thematic analysis moved from the literal identification of objects to three final thematic categories. These three categories were: 1) overarching themes; 2) relational themes; 3) internalization themes. It is the third theme, that of internalization that will be more fully elucidated within this article.

Internalization as self-soothing introject: Accessing the maternal

Many of the daughters identified using physical objects in mourning as a means to soothe their emotional distress. These objects fostered or assisted the daughter's capacity to self-soothe in the face of the emotional reactions associated with their grief. The participants' use of maternal belongings appeared to assist them in accessing the self-soothing capacities or character-

istics of mother which they had taken inside themselves. In psychodynamic terms this process can be viewed as an introjection. Joan Berzoff (1996) defines an introjection as an often unconscious internalization of aspects of significant persons within the self in such a way that the internalized representation takes over functions of the external person. (152). Physical objects thus served as a vehicle that transported the daughter to introjected aspects of her mother, ultimately inducing soothing dimensions of comfort, protection, warmth or care that the daughter could then access for herself in the face of her grief.

The use of physical objects to self-soothe by accessing introjected aspects of mother appeared to be most acute in the early mourning period. With the passage of time, these maternal belongings were not necessarily used with the same intensity or frequency. The more acute the emotional distress, the greater the frequency the daughter would call upon the self-soothing properties of the maternal belongings in her efforts to soothe her internal distress.

For example, one participant identified having taken a blanket from her mother's home to her mother in hospital. Her mother had died with this same blanket on her. For this participant the blanket held a particular smell of both her mother's house and of her mother, which was very important to her. She explained:

It's her house, the smell. It's her. If I'm feeling upset, more so at night or have a funny feeling – I take the blanket. I sleep with it because I can smell it.... When I'm grieving a lot at night time, before I go to bed, if I'm really missing and grieving her in that moment, then I'll usually take the blanket out. It literally makes me think that everything's okay.

Here we see a daughter who takes out the blanket in periods of emotional distress. She finds some measure of comfort and soothing in accessing the blanket's scent as it transports her to the familiar, and to mother herself. It is suggested the blanket transports her to the introjected dimensions of her mother that calm and soothe her.

Another participant identified a crocheted afghan as a significant object in her mourning process. The crocheted afghan was given to her by her mother. Her mother had created it some 28 years previously, upon the birth of one of the participant's children. Of the afghan she shared:

I would shroud in it before. It was protection. I wanted to ward off everything—the world; the pain; the hurt; the tears; everything you know. Not even realizing that I had to go through those things in order to get out the other side.... So I think now when I wrap myself in this blanket its about the essence in me that's the warmth from my mom and not so much a protection as I needed once.

This participant no longer “*shrouded*” herself in this blanket and no longer did she require its’ protection from the world around her. The afghan’s significance shifted from being that of protection to an object of mourning where she found some accessibility to the warmth inside herself that she had been introjected from her mother. She stated:

For me no matter whether I put it [the afghan] in the washing machine I still feel warm. You know, I still feel her essence and her warmth. Then I came to realize that that essence comes from me.

The participant attempted to convey that over time she has realized that it is not so much the afghan but something inside of herself that allowed her to feel “warm.” The afghan assisted her to viscerally access “warm” feelings but she now realized that the feeling was always inside herself.

Another participant identified her mother’s clothing as objects that evoked soothing for her. In the acute phase of her mourning, shortly after her mother’s death, the participant identified that she used to have all of her mother’s clothes in her own closet. She stated:

I took my mother’s clothes, like these wild dresses that she used to wear... I dispersed them throughout my closet. That’s what I did. I thought this is pretty weird, but I could go in and just smell my mother being there... And I just needed to do that, and it felt great. One day there I just took them out. I cleaned out my closets out and gave the clothes to the shelter or Goodwill or whomever, and I was fine with that.

This quote demonstrates the soothing introjected presence that comes from the scent of her mother’s clothing is something this participant needed to access in the early experience of her grief.

For another participant clothing was once again identified as important to her own mourning process because of feelings of comfort she experienced from actually wearing a housecoat that belonged to her mother. She explained:

I feel so cozy and I feel close to mom. I can picture her. She used to sit on the couch with her arm on the couch and knit, in her housecoat with the cat curled up at her feet. And that’s how I picture my mom when I wear that housecoat. You know, it just brings back that family secure feeling of me and my mom.

Here the dimensions of meaning in this article of clothing are revealed. The housecoat provides access to cozy and close feelings of security that suggest maternal introjects, accessible through object use and less accessible otherwise.

Thus we see here examples of physical objects in mourning that were very

diverse in their composition and yet similar in their function. All the objects stimulated the daughter's senses in a manner that evoked feelings of security, warmth, comfort, or closeness. Eliciting these feelings soothed the mourner, as the maternal possessions provided the daughter access to her own introjected dimensions of mother. In this manner, the physical objects provided access to the maternal introjection, internalized for the provision of self-soothing in the midst of grief.

Internalization as identification: My mother and myself

For some participants physical objects evoked an internalization process of maternal identification. Berzoff (1996) defines identification as when "selective and valued parts of another are internalized" (152). In these daughters, identification was evidenced in the daughters assuming the qualities or characteristics of their mothers. This was most poignantly evidenced in one participant's interaction with a unique wooden chair that had belonged to her mother. She shared:

There was a long time [three years] when I couldn't really look at it or sit in it or anything. This [the chair] feels good now. It's an important part of the house now and my life. It feels good. . . . The chair was hidden in a corner and no one ever sat in it or used it—ever. Now we always pull it out and use it a lot. . . . It's nice, and when I sit in the chair I feel like my mother, and then I sit like my mother. I sit like this in that chair [strikes a pose that was her mother's]. And then I say "Oh my God—it's my mother."

This quote powerfully illuminates the maternal identification that exists within this participant. The wooden chair was strongly associated with her mother, and now she herself felt like her mother when she used it, even striking the same maternal pose when sitting in it. It seemed that the chair's capacity to elicit a maternal identification had always existed, however it was too painful for the participant to bear in the early years of her loss. Five years had passed since the loss of her mother, and she now interacted with the chair much differently. No longer did the chair need to be hidden. It was now given a place of prominence from which the participant derived pleasure in her maternal identification.

Another maternal identification was evidenced in one participant's interaction with a china figurine. This participant shared that one of her important objects of mourning was a little china girl figurine dressed in a red coat. The figurine's significance was rooted in the fact that she remembered being entranced by it during her childhood, and that her mother let her play with it, despite its fragility. She inherited the figurine after her mother's death. She stated: "It was something that she [mother] treasured so therefore I cherish it. If it had meant nothing to her it would not be as special to me." Here an identification with mother was apparent in this participant's choice to cherish that which

was treasured by her mother. Not only did she emotionally treasure it, but she also identified with mother in the placement of this object in her home. The participant placed the figurine on the fireplace mantle of her home, mirroring the same spot that her mother had placed it some 45 years previously in the home of her childhood. Treasuring the same object that her mother did, and placing it in the same spot as her mother had evidenced a maternal identification. This serves to illuminate the dimensions of identification as internalization that are operative in these daughters' mourning processes.

Conclusions

This phenomenological study sought to better understand the use of objects in mourning by midlife daughters as they encountered their biological mother's expected deaths. Of particular focus was how objects assisted these daughters in their creation of a sustaining internalized relatedness. For the purpose of this study, these references to internalization were conceptualized utilizing the psychodynamic understandings of introjection and identification. It was apparent that object use for these daughters was not indicative of complicated mourning processes as detailed by Volkan (1981), nor did the daughters' object use seem to reflect Winnicott's (1971) transitional objects.

The idea of physical objects functioning to assist in the creation of a sustained internalized relatedness is incongruent with Sigmund Freud's (1917) early ideas about mourning, as he postulated that the function of "identification, when it occurs, was to facilitate the work of detachment" (Gaines, 1997: 552). However, Anna Freud, in her own private correspondences to friends after the death of her famous father, suggested the necessity for some kind of identification. She suggested that mourning could only be made bearable "by the moments...when one feels fleetingly that the lost person has entered into one and that there is a gain somewhere which denies death" (Young-Bruel, 1988; 314). Therein, Anna Freud substantiates the idea of the necessity for a process of identification to occur in mourning; Identification being one means by which the deceased other is internalized, fostering the ongoing internalized construction of a different relatedness.

As described, objects that functioned as maternal introjects were objects that seemed to offer a self-soothing function for the mourner. Often this soothing was required when the participant was particularly sad or vulnerable in her grief. Catherine Sanders (1999) described the use of self-soothing objects as evident in Colin Murray Parkes' (1972) "Searching and Pining Stage of Mourning." Sanders (1999) contended that it was during the searching and pining stage of mourning that the mourner felt drawn towards places or things associated with their lost loved one. Sanders (1999) described touching or wearing the clothing of the deceased, or displaying prominent objects of special reverence in places where the deceased preferred to be as behaviors that were evidenced during this searching phase. Whether the behavior induced a self-soothing introject, as is the interpretation of this study, or was more reflective of the

mourner's need to search for the loved one who had been lost to them, the behavior still functions from both perspectives to soothe the mourner in the face of affective turmoil. As such, congruence between object use as a means to self-soothing is noted. Incongruence exists around interpretations of the behavior along theoretical lines. Did the use of objects stimulate a self-soothing maternal introject or did this behavior fulfill a searching requirement as detailed in Parkes (1972) mourning stages? The interpretation of such behavior exists with the mourner.

Congruent with this study's findings is the work of Dennis Klass (1993). Klass' study identified the use of objects in mourning as necessary for the solace that they offered the bereaved. Klass (1993) viewed the use of objects as a means by which a sense of the presence of the deceased was created, which induced feelings of solace. The physical object also induced solace by maintaining the inner representation of the loved one. While Klass (1993) didn't specifically identify this sense of presence or the maintenance of an inner representation of the loved one as a maternal introject or a maternal identification, he is clearly talking about similar comforting dimensions of internalization that are stimulated with object use.

Therein, analysis of this study's findings suggest that object use for these daughters is very much associated with the stimulation of internalized dimensions of the deceased mother, with these internalized dimensions being critical to the daughter as she negotiates an internalized accessing of a relationship that was and remains vital in the ongoing formation and development of herself.

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