

Mother-Loss: Recreating Relationship and Meaning

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Cette recherche visait à décrire l'expérience vécue par les femmes adultes qui perdent leur mère. Le cadre d'enquête choisi était explicatif et d'orientation phénoménologique. Cinq femmes ayant accepté de partager leur expérience du sentiment de perte ont été sélectionnées. À partir de récits écrits, de deux entrevues en profondeur et d'une session en groupe, les souvenirs du rapport mère-fille ont été explorés, et le sens que les filles attribuaient à leur sentiment de perte a été décrit. Sept thèmes ont ainsi pu être dégagés : *se souvenir, s'accrocher au passé, faire ses adieux, éprouver des regrets, l'évolution des rapports, rétablir le dialogue, honorer nos mères et nous-mêmes*. La perte de la mère correspond à la perte de la première relation intime avec un être, un rapport investi d'un sens particulier aux yeux des filles puisqu'il exerce une influence profonde et unique sur leur développement personnel. Cette expérience peut s'avérer profondément transformatrice, et la nature du rapport mère-fille constitue une clé essentielle à sa compréhension. Les infirmières éveillées à la dynamique déclenchée par la perte de la mère seront davantage à même de prêter une oreille attentive, de faire appel à leurs connaissances sur le rapport mère-fille et de recourir à leur expérience en matière de deuil et d'accompagnement; elles contribueront ainsi à ce que les femmes touchées puissent faire leur deuil et sortir grandiées de cette expérience.

The purpose of this investigation was to describe adult women's experiences in losing their mother. Using an interpretive phenomenological frame of inquiry, 5 women were purposively selected to share their loss experience. Memories of the mother-daughter relationship were explored, and the meanings the daughters attached to their loss described, in written narratives, 2 in-depth interviews, and 1 group session. Seven themes emerged: *Recalling, Holding On, Saying Goodbye, Longings of the Heart, Shifting Patterns of Relationship, Recreating the Dialogue, and Honouring Our Mothers/Ourselves*. The loss of one's mother represents the loss of one's first intimate relationship, a relationship that has a unique meaning for daughters because their personal development is profoundly and

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uniquely shaped by it. This potentially pervasive and transforming life experience is best understood from an in-depth exploration and understanding of the nature of the mother-daughter relationship. Nurses who come to understand the dynamic interaction of grief and development through women's experience of mother-loss can more successfully offer their presence, their understanding of the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship, and their skills in bereavement care to facilitate healing and to promote health and personal growth.

While nurses are educated to provide bereavement care, the subject of how best to work with adult women who are in a lifelong process of grieving the loss of their mother has not been investigated. The potential impact of this unique experience of loss can be understood only from the literature on the significance of the mother-daughter relationship and the adult bereavement experience in general. The purpose of this inquiry was to directly explore the long-term experiences of women grieving the loss of their mother.

Background

To understand a woman's experience of mother-loss one must first understand the nature of the mother-daughter relationship. Theories and research on this relationship have identified several characteristics that distinguish it from those of all other family dyads. Chodorow (1978) maintains that when the mother is the early and primary source of caregiving she becomes the primary source of attachment and identification for her children. Chodorow asserts that the important developmental processes of separation and individuation occur differently for boys and girls, given their different realities in a predominantly patriarchal society. There are fewer societal expectations for daughters than for sons to separate from their mothers (Chodorow; Flax, 1981). Separation is defined here as the establishment of a person's firm sense of differentiation, of possessing one's own physical and mental boundaries; individuation refers to the range of characteristics, skills, and personality traits unique to a person (Chodorow). In a society that equates maturation with autonomy, many contend that attributes unique to the mother-daughter relationship may develop through the process of identification, including conflict, the undermining of individuation, and the perpetuation of same-gender intergenerational patterning. Boyd's (1989, 1990) research provides some, albeit limited, empirical support for a model of mother-daughter identification in which attachment and conflict are central features of the relationship.

In the context of the same-sex dyad in which identification continues throughout life, women are more likely than men to maintain aspects of their primary relationship with their mother. This does not

mean that they are unable to individuate; the process is wrought with complexity. Gilligan (1982) suggests that for girls and women, issues of feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from their mother or the progress of individuation. Rather, as a result of identifying with their mother, women learn to value and preserve their other relationships.

Fischer (1981) reports that as a daughter moves into adulthood, she and her mother re-evaluate each other, redefining and renegotiating their relative status and role within the parent-child dyad. Thompson and Walker's (1984) research reveals differences between younger and older mother-daughter dyads with respect to bonding and aid patterns. Younger daughters reported greater attachment, having just moved through a period of high emotional involvement, than older daughters. Davis and Corson Jones (1992), however, show that a daughter's attachment to her mother and her level of self-differentiation are not causally related, which supports the view that differentiation of self and attachment are distinct variables in personality development.

The literature documents several factors that undoubtedly influence the mother-daughter relationship. From psychoanalytic theory and more recent feminist research, we know that the aforementioned processes of attachment, identification, separation, and individuation all ultimately impact on the adult mother-daughter relationship. Social learning theory contends that modelling results in similar sex-role behaviours in mothers and daughters (Weitzman, 1984), adding to our understanding of the contextual factors that influence this relationship. Clearly, how these factors have influenced the evolution of the adult mother-daughter relationship will, in turn, influence all dimensions of that relationship, including the experience of mother-loss.

To date, investigations of relationship loss have focused on the experience of spouses, children, and parents. It is often assumed that losing a parent during adulthood is a normative life event for which one prepares over a lifetime and therefore is less difficult to bear than losing a spouse (Bass, Noelker, Townsend, & Demling, 1990; Owen, Fulton, & Markuson, 1982; Sanders, 1980). However, a growing body of research has identified immediate outcomes of an adult's loss of a parent, including: a sense of trauma and devastation (Kahrl, 1988); depression (Vargas, Loya, & Hodde-Vargas, 1989); feelings of guilt, regret, and anticipatory grief; changes in other family relationships; lifestyle changes (Kerr, 1994); and poor health, remorse, and removal of a final psychological buffer against one's own mortality (Perkins & Harris, 1990).

In addition, studies of young women experiencing parental loss have identified intrusive thoughts, images of the deceased, periods of impaired concentration, and varying degrees of somatic and psychological disruption (Galloway, 1990; Malinak, Hoyt, & Patterson, 1979). Kahrl (1988) reports that middle-aged women continued to feel traumatized and devastated 2 years after the death of their mother, and were surprised by the depth of their pain and grief. King (1993), in an analysis of adult women who had been their mother's caregiver, found patterns of grieving for changes in and fantasies about the relationship, loss of the daughter role, and loss of a future mother-daughter relationship. Matthiesen (1989) found that adult women who placed their mothers in nursing homes experienced conflicts in balancing their own needs with those of their mother and grieved similar losses.

Questions about the duration of grief and the nature of symptoms have been central to the studies conducted to date. The findings provide some insight into the nature of the loss experience for adults after the death of a parent. However, the subjective mother-loss experience of women has not been described in depth within nursing. The purpose of this inquiry was to examine the phenomenon in some detail. The specific research questions were:

1. *How do adult women experience the loss of their mother?*
2. *What meanings do they attach to the loss of their lifelong relationship with their mother?*

Methodology

Phenomenological methodology was used to engage participants in reflection and explication of their experience of mother-loss (van Manen, 1990).

Sample

In order to achieve maximum variation in age, marital status, parity, and time elapsed since the mother's death, a purposive sample of five women was selected from among respondents to an advertisement. The nature of this sample made possible an in-depth exploration of five unique stories of loss. The following profiles of the participants (using self-selected pseudonyms) describe the sample.

Avesia was a 56-year-old married professional woman with two grown children. Six years prior to the study, her mother had died of a heart attack at the age of 81 while Avesia was living in another country.

The qualities of their relationship included an emphasis on family history and tradition through storytelling and travel, with Avesia adopting her mother's childrearing values and beliefs and following in her mother's career path.

Barb, a 31-year-old university student, was married with a 17-month-old son. Her mother was 67 years old when she died of cancer, during the very hours when Barb was in labour and childbirth. Barb had grown up in a large family in which her mother functioned for many years as a single parent, expecting self-control and independence from her daughter. Barb described their relationship as distant and uncommunicative, although she began to grow close to her mother as she cared for her during her illness.

Cathy was a 44-year-old single woman living alone and working in a service industry. Her mother had died of cancer 11 years previously. Cathy was living with her mother at the time of her death. She had been highly dependent on her mother since the age of 18 when she began to experience multiple health challenges as a result of an accident. Their relationship evolved into one of friendship and mutual nurturing, with Cathy growing more independent throughout her mother's final years.

Fiona was a professional woman in her 50s. Her mother had died of a heart attack at the age of 63, in a distant city, 20 years earlier. At that time Fiona and her husband were raising their young children. She described an abusive childhood and a strained mother-daughter relationship during her adulthood.

Jackie, a 44-year-old married woman, was the mother of four young children; her mother, a woman in her 80s, had died of cancer 2 months previously. Jackie had been a significant, nurturing presence during her mother's 17-year illness. She had been living in a distant city for the last 5 years of her mother's life.

Data Collection

Participants engaged in a process of dialogue that included written narratives on their relationship with their mother, two in-depth individual interviews ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, and a final group interview.

Prior to the first interview, participants were given a blank journal and asked to describe their relationship with their mother through narrative, poetry, photographs, and/or letters. Four of the five participants responded with narratives varying in length from two to 10 pages.

These were used as the first set of data, forming the basis for further exploration in the first interview.

Written consent was obtained. All interviews, which were videotaped, began with an open-ended, non-directive invitation for the participant to expand upon her narrative and to comment on her feelings, actions, and interactions with others during the course of her loss experience. For example, Avesia's journal entry included many powerful comments about her mother's care and support:

I remember feeling really important standing on a stool beside her helping to make cookies...she even used to play dolls with me.

This narrative became an important piece of data for exploration and elaboration whereby the interviewer could respond with:

You have described many examples of the ways in which your mother was a supportive influence in your life...tell me more about the ways in which your mother nurtured you as a young girl...

To facilitate dialogue, the interviewer used reflection, occasional self-disclosure, or brief descriptions of other women's experiences. The interviewer also asked, "What is life like for you now, without your mother's living presence?" The second interview was used to further explore and validate themes. All discussions were geared to the needs of the participants, whose well-being was the foremost concern (Munhall, 1988).

After all the interviews had been completed, a group session, also videotaped, permitted collective validation of the researcher's observations, interpretations, and descriptions. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences, challenge and/or validate the researcher's interpretations, summarize common themes, and comment on their role as participant in the research. These strategies are consistent with feminist narrative research, which strives to achieve the best possible account of collective experiences while honouring participants' unique stories (Benner, 1994; Hall & Stevens, 1991; Reissman, 1994; Russel, 1987; Webb, 1992).

Data Analysis

Interpretive analysis was used to study each case separately, beginning with the individual's narrative. Themes identified in the narrative were used to develop questions for the first interview. Data from each interview were then analyzed for themes under two broad categories: relationship with mother and experience of loss. During the second inter-

view, initial interpretations were clarified, themes explored in greater depth, and a more comprehensive understanding of the participant's experience of loss elicited (Benner, 1994). Videotaping for subsequent review served to facilitate recollection and understanding of various significant moments in the interview. Thematic analysis across cases revealed commonalities of experience from one case to the next, permitting development of composite representations. Participants reviewed and validated their stories and initial data sets, prior to the group interview, and selected pseudonyms for presentation of their stories of relationship and loss. This combination of informal and formal participant validation served to promote authenticity (Sandelowski, 1993).

Findings

Participants experienced the loss of their mothers holistically, linking thoughts, feelings, and enactments of the mother-daughter relationship that extended from birth, through life, death, and beyond. Seven themes emerged from the data, as revealed in their stories.

Recalling

This theme set the context for women to uncover the nature of the primary attachment and affiliation with their mother, described specifically as *mother's caring* and *struggles of relationship*.

Mother's caring. Participants' recollections and knowledge of how they were mothered from birth through to the time of their mother's death provided poignant evidence of how the loss of their mother represented loss of their first relationship of caring, and thus loss of support, nurturing, protection, and security.

My mom listened, and accepted, unconditionally...encouraged us to do whatever we wanted...she was really motherly.... This support helped me through exams, difficult teaching situations, my sons' minor illnesses and [my] marriage.

I went through a miscarriage and she was there for me and she really [crying]...she took me to the hospital.... And she really did care and went out of her way...you're always like a little kid when it comes to your mom.

Struggles of relationship. Participants also recalled conflicts and concerns that reflected a tension between continuing the mother's role of caregiving and changing the mother-daughter affiliation from a parent-child relationship to an adult-adult one. For example, Cathy's

recollection of her mother's caring was also experienced as a barrier to her individuation:

Mom protected me so much I felt smothered and I couldn't do anything about it.... My mom sheltered and protected me too much, held me back.

Fiona's lifelong sense of hurt and abandonment was mixed with a strong need to seek her mother's approval:

I never felt as if I did anything that pleased her...sometimes I think I could say I hated her, you know, I could feel that...but then I really wanted her approval. I remember feeling that. I really wanted her to say that I'd done something well.

The process of recalling the mother-daughter relationship during the grieving process thus revealed powerful and frequently discordant interpersonal dynamics that were essential to understanding the experience of loss.

Holding On

The experience of mother-loss was also permeated with a tendency to "hold on" (Chodorow, 1978). This appeared to be a component of the process of separation, one that took place gradually over time — interspersed with "letting go" (Chodorow) — and beginning as the inevitability of the mother's death became apparent. As Barb described it:

...her mental capacities were failing, I had to do more for her.... I wanted her to look after me. I wanted my mother to help me throughout my pregnancy, I wanted her encouragement and advice.

Jackie held on to the relationship by continuing in her role as nurturer and enveloping herself in her mother's scent:

[After she died] I didn't really want to leave her there but after I'd followed through with funeral home "pick up" arrangements and getting the ring...I was the one doing the matter of fact things the way Mom and I handled her cancer...got her clothes picked out and looked after what Dad would wear for the funeral. Mom knew I would be the one to do these things [crying].... I slept with her nightie on that night because it still had her "smell" on it.

Saying Goodbye

Participants ultimately experienced the "letting go" (Chodorow, 1978) dimension of their loss through "saying goodbye." Jackie reflected:

...she breathed her last and I took her hand and said, "You're not alone" [sobbing].... We [she and her mother] were holding hands.... It was very peaceful to see her finished — finished with all that hard work.

For four of the women the funeral became an important part of the loss experience. Symbolic ways of saying goodbye provided comfort and relief.

Avesia: My sister and I placed the ashes in the grave. And it was just a really comforting feeling, it was sort of, "This is the last thing we can do for you," and it was really nice.

Longings of the Heart

Participants' descriptions of their loss experience over time included an uncovering of aspects of the mother-daughter relationship that they wished had been different. The diversity of these women's experiences of longing were represented in the sub-themes *needing to know more*, *regretting*, and *missing her*. These sub-themes reflected various dimensions of the mother-daughter relationship-building process, including elements of attachment, role identification, individuation, and same-gender intergenerational patterning.

Needing to know more. Avesia expressed a strong need to go back to the very beginning of her relationship with her mother, reflecting the central theme of her unique story of loss, in which she experienced a sense of abandonment:

I wanted to find out as much about my mom as I could.... During our last visit together I had a lump in my throat for a long time and I couldn't ask her, but I wanted to ask her, "Mom, what was it like when I was born?" But I couldn't, because I would have started to cry.... And I would like to know more about what it was like for her actually growing up.... I had a strong sense of abandonment.

Regretting. The collective experience of regret was clearly represented by Barb's longing to express her appreciation for her mother at a time when she herself was immersed in being a mother, an experience she had hoped to share with her mother.

I feel regret because I didn't like to listen to her advice. I thought that I knew it all. I didn't give her credit for her knowledge and experience. I wish...and regret not thanking her or telling her that I appreciated her concern for me. After becoming a mother myself, I now realize what sacrifices my mother had made for me.

Missing her. Avesia's identification and affiliation with her mother was apparent in her longing to speak with her, in her missing the powerful primary relationship.

I think you have this connection with your mother that you don't have with your father. I mean, even though I realized that I bonded with my father...I think your mother is still closer.... What I miss most is being able to just talk with her.

While participants reported that the day-to-day outward expressions of grief had, over time, changed to some extent, the longing remained. The intense need for attachment and affiliation with their mothers persisted long after the immediate sense of loss had faded away.

Shifting Patterns of Relationship

All participants identified, in the loss experience, changes in their relationships with significant others. The women assumed aspects of their mother's former role with others, and others in turn dealt with their loss by responding accordingly to the surviving daughter. Family members grew closer to or more distant from each other throughout the grieving process. The experiences of relationship changes were captured in three sub-themes: *dealing with magnified conflicts*, *taking care of others*, and *setting own needs aside*. Participants described how others expected them to get on with life, which led them to the final sub-theme, *gaining support*.

Dealing with magnified conflicts. This theme described longstanding family issues. For example, Barb initially resented the expectation that she would, in her mother's absence, assume the leadership role in the family, yet this was a role her mother would have expected of her.

It was just really my sister and I that kind of took over and helped my dad...they [her brothers] just couldn't handle the situation...we get very upset at that sometimes because we feel like we're doing all the family arranging...and they just kind of show up.

Cathy's longstanding conflict with her siblings grew intense and disruptive as they settled their mother's estate:

She was hoping her death would bring my brother and sister and I closer...it has made us even further apart....

Taking care of others. This sub-theme described the burden of becoming caregiver to a surviving parent and siblings. Jackie's reflections are representative:

I had all this to do before I left, to make sure I got this will straightened out. I also had to get all the paperwork for my dad so he wouldn't have to worry. My other sister is doing well but I didn't know how much stress she could handle...

Setting own needs aside. This sub-theme described the outcome of managing the multiple tasks involved in caring for a surviving parent, mothering one's own children, and returning to work. Barb's experience had a direct effect on her relationship with her infant son, leading her to set her needs aside in order to manage. Her experience illustrates that of the women collectively:

I can remember when he [her son] was born and...I just couldn't allow myself to like him...just real detachment there...I just didn't want to get myself close to him because I was afraid that something would happen...I just had to put it aside...because people expect you to just get back into things....You had things to do and I'd do them....didn't have time to talk with anyone about my needs.

Gaining support. This sub-theme described the ways in which the women received support from others:

Fiona: My other aunt...now is like a mother to me and like a grandmother to my children.

Avesia: One reason that I am able to work through it is that he [her husband] is able to be supportive now, where he wasn't when my mother died....didn't want me to talk about it....

Barb: It's nice that she [her sister] has gone through motherhood and had two children and has lots of advice for me...we've really become closer [crying].

Jackie: The nurse put her arm around me as Mom passed away...and they stayed with us....They gave us our space and yet stayed....They went through it with us.

A re-patterning occurred in the lives of the women as they experienced and confronted conflicts, assumed multiple caregiving roles (similar in some cases to the roles their mothers had assumed), and, in order to manage multiple roles, set their own needs aside, gaining support from others in various ways. Integral to the collective experiences of gaining support were shifting relationships with family and friends or new associations with professionals that reminded them of their mother's caregiving role in the mother-daughter relationship.

Recreating the Dialogue

The five participants portrayed the experience of mother-loss as one of maintaining affiliation; they perceived their mother's continued presence in their lives, reflecting the powerful spiritual dimension and intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship. The women spoke about physical sensations, hearing their mother's voice, and spontaneously "speaking with" their mother, either out loud or in their thoughts. Four sub-themes capture the diversity of participants' experiences of recreating their affiliation with their mother: *sensing her presence*, *being like mother*, *keeping remembrances*, and *exploring family history and tradition*.

Sensing her presence. The nature of their mother's continued presence closely resembled the nature of the mother-daughter relationship. For example, the ongoing "dialogue" that connected Cathy with her mother was represented by Cathy's identification with her mother's role as a seamstress, and manifested in her calling out to her mother for support:

I hear her voice: "If you don't do it [sew] with the utmost care and precision, you'll never be happy with the item you are creating"...

When I'm stuck sewing, and I'm working it out...I'm going, "Mom, what am I doing wrong?" and then I calm down and everything goes like clock-work.... So she is there.

Barb's longing to affiliate with her mother in her own new motherhood role was expressed through her awareness of her mother's presence, guiding her in caring for her infant:

I remember being totally exhausted one night, and I was sleeping and the baby was crying and all of a sudden I felt...somebody tugging my shoulder, like "Wake up. Wake up." And I opened my eyes and there was this figure...bending over and trying to wake me up, and it pointed toward the baby's room.... And I just said, "Oh, it's Mom."

Fiona's fear of her mother was expressed very powerfully:

I had this experience of smelling her perfume...this really strong sense came over me...similar to that experience I had when I heard her calling my name...this is her presence.

Being like mother. The women identified with their mothers. For example, Jackie identified physical features and character traits that she and her mother shared, while Fiona feared at times that she might repeat similar patterns of interaction with her own children:

Jackie: *I look down and see my mother's hands [holding out her hands and crying]. Only hers were longer — mine are fat. But when they're working [long pause] they're her working hands, you know [crying].*

Fiona: *I catch myself sometimes, being my mother. And I find that very disturbing...why did I do that, why did I say that?...*

Keeping remembrances. The women used tangible remembrances to keep their mothers near.

Barb: *I wear this [necklace] practically all the time. I hardly ever take it off...*

Exploring family history and tradition. This sub-theme was most powerfully illustrated in Avesia's reference to snowdrops and travelling to her mother's homeland, reminding her of and affirming the mother-daughter bond.

Snowdrops have come to symbolize my mom for me...when we got back after her memorial service the snowdrops were out.... We've planted snowdrops in our back yard now.... Here was a whole country of soft-spoken, old-fashioned people just like my mother...it was exactly as my mom had described it and I recognized my great-grandparents' house.... I had a lump in my throat the whole time...we climbed to the top of Blarney Castle so my dad could kiss the Blarney stone...a family tradition.

A strong sense of continued need for identification with and attachment to their mother was apparent in the stories. This might be viewed as an important part of the process of individuation for adult daughters whose mothers have died.

Honouring Our Mothers/Ourselves

The participants' insights reflected the ways in which they had found meaning in and learned from their experience of loss. They described having come to more deeply appreciate their mothers' lives and at the same time undergoing a personal transformation as they developed new perspectives on their own lives as women. This final theme may be described as the process of finding positive, enduring meaning in the mother-daughter relationship, through honouring the unique value of their mothers and themselves. Two sub-themes were apparent: *giving voice to her story* and *celebrating change*.

Giving voice to her story described the ways in which participants gained a more intimate awareness of their mothers' hardships, vulnerabilities, and resiliency, and a deeper appreciation for their mothers as women. Fiona, for example, grew aware of her mother's hardships, and

this enabled Fiona to move forward in her own life, having gained strength and a capacity for healthier relationships.

I know she had a lot of needs.... And I feel badly that I didn't really ever know her...my life is so opposite — it's like night and day to what hers was. My relationship with my kids and my husband and all of us together, like it's just so, so different. In some ways maybe I have her to thank for that because maybe I learned how I didn't want it to be.

Barb expressed her appreciation for her mother as she learned about some of the challenges of raising children:

After becoming a mother myself, I now realize what sacrifices my mother had made for me and my brothers and sisters.... I can see that now...she was a very strong person, very hard-working and independent.

Celebrating change. This sub-theme described how participants transformed the experience of loss into one of honour and celebration; contained within their stories were statements of acceptance, resolution, hope, positive change, and self-transcendence.

Fiona: I make a conscious effort to try and do things differently because I can remember the pain that I felt as a child and as a young adult in my relationship with my mother, and...I just didn't want to have that kind of a relationship with my own family...

Barb: Really, I've learned a lot since then you know.... I seem to take her advice more seriously now....There's lots to be said for your own experience.... I used to take life for granted...not now.

Cathy: I have more control over myself now.... At one time I couldn't do any of this...so why not take this course [dress-making]? It will keep me busy and it will update my diploma...she would sure be pleased with what I accomplished.

Jackie: ...the whole process up to this day is helping me work through things...even to look into other things in my life...you're stopping and evaluating what you're doing...and if I should be changing...I'm thinking more of living for today.

Avesia: So there are resolved issues and they feel more comfortable...and what it does is you gain understanding. It's very healing.

The women in this investigation had apparently achieved more mature individuation, coming to appreciate their own lives and to see the possibility of enjoying life in the present. They had expanded their relationships with others, while maintaining a sense of connectedness through an awareness of their mother's abiding presence in their lives. They used fond memories and both tangible and symbolic remembrances of their mother to maintain intergenerational identification and attachment in the mother-daughter relationship. Simultaneously,

however, as they gained new insights and knowledge of their mother as an inner presence in their lives, they had come to terms with their loss and were able to draw upon their mother's life to find and celebrate new meanings and directions in their lives.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the relevance of relationship in women's experience of mother-loss. For the participants, the experience entailed recreating the relationship by recalling their mother's care and merging past and present — or their childhood and adulthood experiences. While for these women the loss constituted the painful removal of their role as child, the experiences they recalled as part of the grieving process were those as daughter; these memories served to either reconnect them to the experience or force them to work through the more negative aspects of the recollections. This recreation of the relationship facilitated the evolution of the grief process into a state of further personal individuation in an enduring connectedness that honoured both mother and self.

Defining self in connection with and separate from others has been a focus of feminist research. In their early work, Gilligan (1982) and Chodorow (1978) contended that the feminine personality is defined in relation to others — particularly the mother. More recently, researchers have demonstrated the ability of women to be both connected to and separate from others, depending on their role in the relationship. In Attanucci's (1988) study of women's descriptions of self, women described relationships that much more closely characterized interdependence than autonomy or separation. The participants in this study described their relationship with their mother as ongoing, extending beyond role identification, similarities, and differences.

While the literature indicates that daughters often sustain, well into their 40s, a sense of their function as "child" in the mother-daughter relationship (Fischer, 1986), the findings of this study suggest that for adult women the grieving process intensifies the experience and, perhaps, hastens resolution of the conflict associated with the role of child in the adult mother-daughter relationship. A similar phenomenon is identified by Fischer (1986), who found that daughters intensely engaged both instrumentally and emotionally in mother-daughter relationships, by virtue of assuming the caregiver role of "mutual mothering" (p. 195–196), and similarly conveyed a sense of "holding on" while simultaneously allowing the relationship to evolve. This powerful connection between loss and development has been identified by theorists.

Gilligan (1982) notes the value of preserving the relationship, and Caffarella and Olson (1993), summarizing the work of several theorists, observe that individuation must be accompanied by feelings of connectedness and affiliation in order for development to occur. Gleason's (1991) research into the mother-daughter relationship supports this stance, the author noting that all experiences must be accepted as reflecting core aspects of women's development, and not labelled as pathological or dysfunctional. Judith Viorst (1986) describes this link between loss and development:

The road to human development is paved with renunciation. Throughout our life we grow by giving up. We give up some of our deepest attachment to others. We give up certain cherished parts of ourselves. We must confront, in the dreams we dream as well as in our intimate relationships, all that we never will have and never will be. (p. 16)

The findings of this study add significantly to Bowlby's (1973) work on attachment and grief theory. The nature of attachment and relationship varied among the participants in this study, in keeping with the complexities unique to their relationships. Bowlby's model of grief, characterized by a set of stages including shock, protest, apathy, despair, and detachment, arose from his theory of childhood attachment. His model characterizes grief as a process in which detachment is an essential step in reorganizing one's life, allowing one to form new attachments in the absence of the deceased. Themes of abandonment and processes of detachment were observed as part of the grief response for some of the women in this study. However, Bowlby's theory, like other traditional grief and loss theories, limits one's experiences to a single reality or set of stages. Such theories do not sufficiently explain the subtle experiences of loss, which continue over time, as illuminated by this study in which the women recreated and transcended their relationships with their mother. Consistent with the findings of several researchers (Galloway, 1990; Kahrl, 1988; Kerr, 1994; King, 1993), this study found that the women experienced a sense of trauma and devastation, images of the deceased, grieving the loss of the daughter role, feelings of regret, anticipatory grief, and shifts in family relationships. Beyond that, however, the experience of grief was marked by the significance the loss of the mother-daughter relationship had in the women's own experience of development.

The findings of this study strongly support more recent views of grief. Kaplan's (1995) interpretation of loss and grieving expands upon earlier attachment theory by viewing loss as an emotional process embodying the vitality of the human spirit, rather than death, with its connotations of decay, finality, and terminated relationships. Kaplan

suggests that individuals form attachments through human dialogue — in the intimacy between parent and child — and that once they have entered into that dialogue they cannot live without it. The findings of this study support Kaplan's view that mourning entails not only detachment and a gradual letting go of the deceased, but also a powerful affirmation of attachments. Since the mother-daughter relationship involves two women whose identities and life experiences tend to be strongly linked, mother-loss may include a subtle sense of self-loss that is not easy for women to articulate or understand. As the women in this study responded to their loss by recalling their mother's care and their relationship struggles, and as they experienced a strong sense of longing and changes in their other relationships, they recreated a semblance of their relationship with their primary caregiver — their mother. The formation of their mother 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 as women.

Implications for Nursing

Nurses caring for women experiencing mother-loss face a multifaceted challenge. Theories used to guide nursing care for the grieving person focus narrowly on working through the loss. While approaches to care that reject assumptions about "normal," time-limited grieving have gained widespread acceptance in clinical practice (Carter, 1989; Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Harvey, 1996; Joffrion & Douglas, 1994; Kaplan, 1995; Solari-Twadell, Schmidt Bunkers, Wang, & Snyder, 1995), attention to interactions specific to the mother-daughter relationship has been lacking.

To maximize their care of adult women who have lost their mother, nurses must reframe their supportive care to help the bereaved woman resolve the loss of a relationship that uniquely challenges her own self-image and development. Furthermore, nurses must extend their efforts beyond supportive care, to health promotion. These nursing efforts are inextricably linked; specific elements of nursing intervention may simultaneously embrace both facets of care if framed and undertaken within this more holistic understanding of the woman's experience of mother-loss.

Care might begin with helping the woman to explore the links between the experience of loss and the nature of her lifelong relationship with her mother. The nurse must explore patterns of mother-daughter relationship in the context of the woman's life, helping her to understand the influences that have contributed to her unique sense of

loss. This requires fully eliciting the woman's story while making her aware that dealing with this particular loss has implications for her own sense of self. For example, nurses might help women who have had conflictual or abusive mother-daughter relationships to understand and normalize their feelings of anger and detachment as a legitimate way of resolving a negative relationship rather than seeing them as merely a phase of grieving. Women may need frequent opportunities to discuss their feelings and to understand that themes of abandonment may date to their early childhood. Women who have experienced a negative mother-daughter relationship may remain hopeful throughout their lives that positive attachment will occur (Kaplan, 1995). For these women, mother-loss not only represents the loss of hope for the relationship, but also affords them a chance to learn and grow, fostering more positive roles and relationships. Other women, by contrast, may need to work through positive aspects of the relationship that they have internalized as reflecting an extension of their mothers in themselves. Regardless of her particular experience, every woman who has lost her mother will need help in resolving the role conflict associated with being her mother's child versus being an adult and an individuated extension of her mother.

By responding to a range and depth of feelings, nursing can promote health and healing, helping each woman to understand both the nature of her relationship with her mother and the links between personal growth, development, and health. The first step is helping the woman to view health as part of her consciousness (Newman, 1986) and health promotion as her own personal resource for everyday living (Ford Gilboe, 1994; McWilliam, 1993; McWilliam, Stewart, Brown, Desai, & Coderre, 1996). Helping women to achieve greater individuation by better understanding themselves in the context of their mother-daughter relationship is the essence of comprehensive health promotion in the context of this grief experience.

Interventions to facilitate this development can take place in the context of a long-term therapeutic relationship in either a community or a clinical setting. More immediate needs may be seen around the time of the death as the woman attempts to hold on to the relationship, immersing herself in the role of caregiver. A woman who was not present for her mother's death may benefit from a description of the measures used to comfort and support her mother. Focusing on the multiple roles that daughters often assume and encouraging self-care activities will facilitate the grieving process. By recognizing the tendency of some women to set their own needs aside, nurses can facilitate healing and promote health; they might encourage the woman to

address her loss, to talk about what life has been like for her. Nurses can also refer women to community support groups where they will be able to share their stories of relationship and loss. Symbolic "goodbyes" can be used to facilitate a "letting go" of the mother's physical being. By presenting the phenomenon of sensing the mother's presence as a valid response to the loss, nurses can facilitate the process of recreating the relationship as an inner presence. Finally, giving voice to her mother's life story may reveal new strengths and insights in a woman's own development. The Appendix consists of a summary of proposed theme-related nursing interventions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate both the scope and the breadth of nursing opportunities in caring for women grieving the loss of their mother. Integral to the profession's commitment to caring are concepts and skills that describe the ways in which nurses care for people experiencing significant loss. "Presence," a concept that represents the ways in which nurses attend to the fundamental need for human contact in health and illness situations, reflects purposeful action, meaningful dialogue, and a spiritual dimension of care (Allanach & Golden, 1988; Benner, 1984; Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Brown, 1986; Chinn, 1991; Cohen, Hausner, & Johnson, 1994; Dietrich, 1994; Eakes, 1993; Montgomery, 1992, 1993; Pederson, 1993; Samarel, 1991; Swansen, 1993). A nurse's presence in caring for women experiencing mother-loss must extend beyond anticipating and attending to the loss and being there for the death; it must encompass an understanding of the mother-daughter relationship and facilitate discussion of what losing, resolving, and recreating that relationship mean to the woman. The nurse's presence extends to working with the woman over time as she explores personal development in response to the loss. The findings of this study support the essential health-promoting functions of exploring the nature of the mother-daughter relationship and helping the woman to resolve and recreate the mother-daughter connection, thereby transforming the loss into an experience of personal growth.

These findings challenge nursing researchers to consider further inquiry in the area of loss and bereavement. A clear limitation of this study was the cultural homogeneity of the participants, all of them belonging to a culture in which open discussion of grief and loss was the norm. Investigations of the loss experience for women whose mothers died during their infancy, childhood, or adolescence would also further inform nursing practice. Given this study's illumination of

the ongoing nature of loss, researchers might examine the experiences of one or two women over an extended period, in search of patterns and transitions. Exploring the experiences of nurses who have cared for women throughout their loss would further explicate how practice might be refined. Clearly, if nurses are to fully develop their role in caring for women, much is to be learned from understanding the depth and breadth of mother-loss as an enduring experience of recreating relationship and meaning.

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Appendix *A Nurse's Presence with Women
Grieving the Loss of Their Mother*

Being There: The Time of Initial Loss

- Attend to daughters as caregivers who have personal needs, and set aside time to discuss these needs.
- Facilitate communication between mother and daughter and convey your availability.
- Anticipate daughter's need to intensify involvement with mother; she may not wish to leave bedside.
- Anticipate mother's disengagement and support daughter through this process.
- Survey daughter's need for respite care, acknowledging her multiple duties at work and at home.
- Care for mother and inform daughter of events; offer insights into her mother's experience.
- When daughter is not present for mother's death, offer to tell her about her mother's passing.

Responding to the Immediate and Ongoing Grief

- Consider ways in which we encounter women's stories of loss: as caregivers at their mother's bedside, in the community, during women's contact with the health-care system.
- Provide opportunities for women to tell their stories of loss and legitimize their grief experience as one that extends beyond the loss of an individual to one of loss of a primary relationship involving one's own self.
- Acknowledge the potential depth of loss; do not dismiss the loss as a life-course event.
- Explore shifts in other significant relationships.
- Link women to community supports and counselling resources according to their expressed needs.

Exploring the Nature of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

- Set aside assumptions about the nature of the mother-daughter relationship and explore the nature of attachment and affiliation.
- Recognize that the experience of loss is embedded in the nature of the relationship and is shaped by family context, new relationships, and changes in women's role in society.
- Consider developmental and contextual issues when helping women to find meaning in their experience, and explore the meaning of the loss in their larger life context.
- Determine the inextricable links between the identities of mother and daughter.
- Explore the nature of longing and lost hope in the mother-daughter relationship.

Helping Women to Recreate the Dialogue of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

- Explore how women conceptualize the finality of their mother's death.
- Normalize and legitimize their experiences of sensing the mother's presence as spiritual connections are explored.
- Help women to incorporate these experiences when forming an "inner presence" of their mother.
- Encourage women to comment on mother-daughter similarities and differences.
- Encourage women to retain and initiate rituals of remembrance.
- Keep in mind that disclosure of painful memories may require the skilled and supportive presence of a caring other over time.
- Create an environment of support and acceptance, and facilitate links with other women.

Transforming the Loss

- Engage women in reminiscence about the joys and sorrows in the relationship.
- Encourage women to tell their mother's stories and make links with their grief experience.
- Explore aspects of loss that are positive, that tell the women something about their mothers and themselves throughout the loss; determine changes they would like to see in their own lives.
- Acknowledge the potential that exists for women to broaden their definition and sense of self as women.
- Celebrate women's capacity to separate themselves from, yet remain connected with, their mothers and significant others.
- Identify the potential for honouring their mothers and themselves as women.
- Offer support for women to embrace new directions in their lives.
- Encourage women to reach out to each other.
- Consider specific strategies such as support circles, guided imagery, prayer, art therapy, and narrative writing about their experiences of relationship and loss.