

Reflections of Young Adults on the Loss of a Parent in Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the reflections of young adults on the experience of parental loss in adolescence. Data were collected through in-depth personal interviews and analyzed guided by a phenomenological approach. The findings of the study are discussed through the lens of the Double ABC-X model of family stress and adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Four themes emerged from the analysis: a) Pileup of stressors aggravate grieving; b) Benefits of social support; c) Coping strategies used by the participants; d) Adaptation to the loss of a parent: personal growth and maturation. Implications for future research and practitioners working with this population are discussed.

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the reflections of young adults on the experiences of parental loss in adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

- 153 million children around the world have either lost both parents, a mother, or a father (Gimenez, Chou, Liu, & Liu, 2013).
- Factors that affect children's grief process: support from family members, deceased parent's gender, gender of the child, and circumstances of death (Raveis et al., 1999).
- Unresolved grief may lead to psychiatric issues, health problems, and depression later in life (McClatchey & Wimmer, 2012).

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

- 11 participants (18-34 y.o.) from Montreal and New Jersey recruited through snowball sampling and personal connections.
- Average age at the time of parental death: 17 years.
- Average time passed since death: 8 years.
- Interviews were recorded, transcribed

ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Themes and patterns emerged from the data and many categories were generated.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Using an adaptation of McCubbin and Patterson's (1983) Double ABC-X model, the following four themes emerged from the data:

1) Pileup of stressors aggravate grieving

Participants were confronted with a pileup of stressors that made grieving more difficult. Stressors were: increased responsibilities, extra chores, financial issues, relocation, and strained relationships with family members.

✧ *I also did gain a lot of responsibilities around the household, because my mom was overwhelmed and had to worry about the finances – Molly*

2) Benefit of social support

Participants could depend on their siblings, surviving parent or extended relatives for comfort and support.

✧ *[My relationship with my sister] definitely got stronger because we shared a very painful experience. So we felt like we are the only two people who actually understand what it's like to go through this kind of pain, so we have a little bit stronger bond – Akiko*

3) Coping strategies used by the participants

The three main coping mechanisms described by the participants were: hard work, friends as a distraction, and isolation.

✧ *So I think one of my ways to sort of get my mind off things was just to work like crazy. I mean I've never worked so hard in that one, two years of my life – William*

4) Adaptation to the loss of a parent: personal growth/maturation.

The loss made the participants stronger, helped them gain maturity, and fostered a different perspective on life over the years.

✧ *Suffering makes you learn a lot about life, about yourself, about others, about everything. It depends how you deal with it, but suffering makes you learn a lot, it makes you grow – Noah*

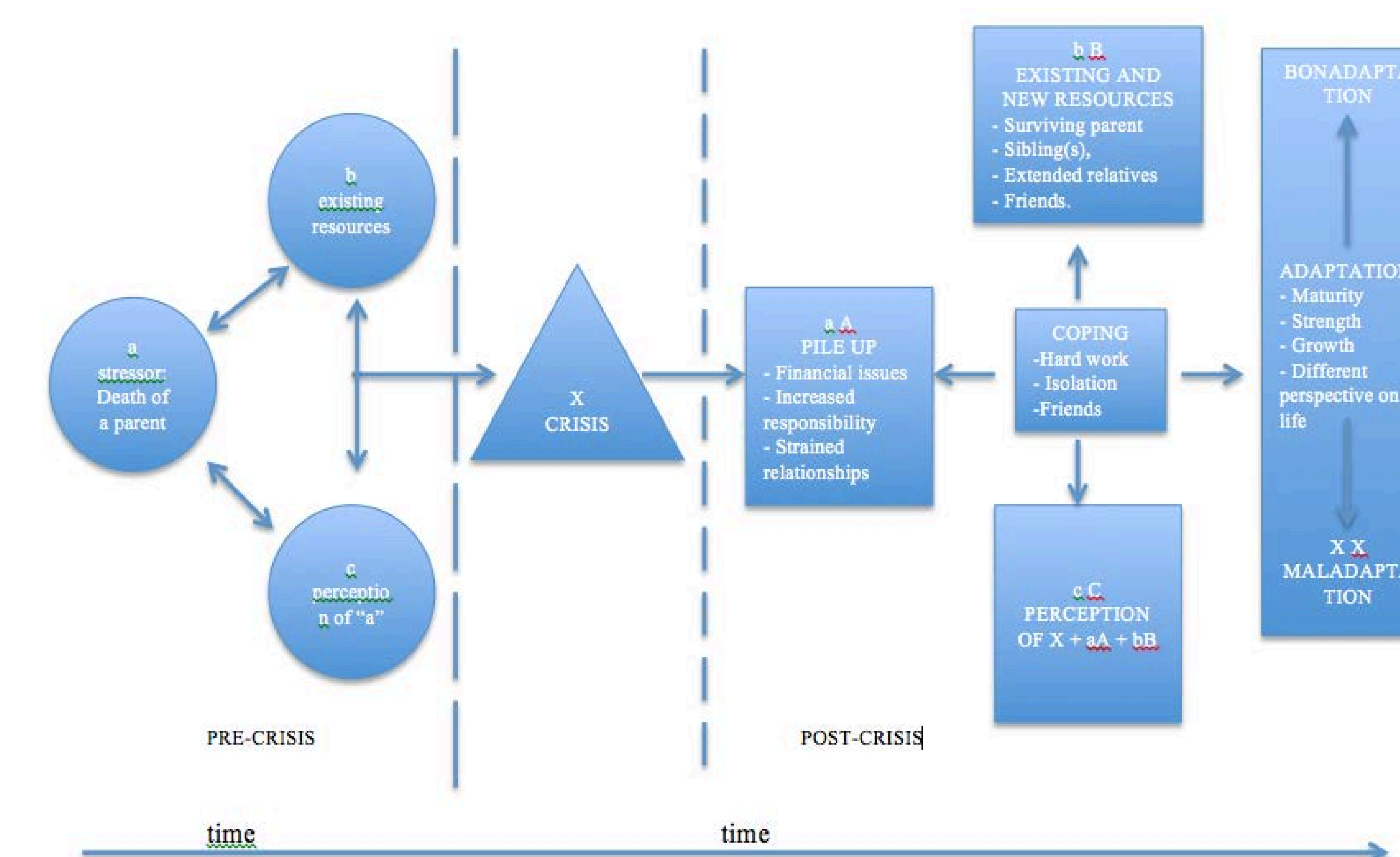


Figure 1. Adaptation of the Double ABCX Model for grieving families

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

- The adaptation of an individual to the loss of their parent was influenced by many factors: Support from family and friends, change in family dynamics, pileup of stressors.
- The traumatic experience of losing a parent contributed to all participants' personal growth and maturity.
- Research on grief can help practitioners such as counselors, psychologists, and those leading grief camps to create strategies to help children and adolescents cope with the loss of a parent.