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Bereavement in Online Graduate Students: Perspectives on Academic Success and Interventions

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Edythe Marie Bouldin

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

Bereavement in Online Graduate Students: Perspectives on Academic Success and

Interventions

by

Edythe Marie Bouldin

MS, Virginia State University, 2012

BA, Kent State University, 1983

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

Walden University

February 2019

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill an existing gap in research on bereavement and graduate students. The study explored how bereavement and grief affect a person physically, mentally, and cognitively. Prior studies have addressed bereavement in undergraduate college students, but little research has focused on online graduate students and bereavement. This study fills that gap in the literature allowing university personnel and the public access to an understanding as to how online graduate students' bereavement affects their academic performance and how they perceive their university supports them during their time of bereavement. This exploration used a case study design and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as its theoretical foundation. Open-ended interview data were collected from 10 formerly bereaved graduate students using face to face structured interviews. Interviews were transcribed and categorized using a 7-step process to organize all relevant statements. The results revealed that bereaving graduate students felt isolated, experienced difficulty focusing, and required extensions for completing their coursework. Participants concluded it was important for bereaving students to ask for help during bereavement. This study provides an understanding of the experience of being a bereaved online graduate student, and further provides information to assist university personnel in how to serve bereaved graduate students. . This information may lead to enhanced programs or services meeting the needs of graduate students, including promotion of staff training related to the unique needs of bereaved graduate students.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all those experiencing bereavement and especially dedicated to my brother, Edward L. Tisdale, who was my inspiration.

Acknowledgments

My sincerest thanks to my husband, Thomas, who supported me during this long journey.

I would like to express sincere gratitude to my family who were on this journey with me. For my parents, Edward and Dixie, for teaching me I can do anything I want. Without them, none of this would be possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Grief is related to the emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral response to a death or loss (Hansson, Stroebe, & Stroebe, 1993). Kübler-Ross (1969) noted that while death can be a terrifying and distressing occurrence, fear of death is common, even for those who believe they have overcome the fear. Grief related to the loss of a loved one through death is known as bereavement (Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). Some of the symptoms of bereavement are guilt and health impairments (Li, Stroebe, Chan, & Chow, 2014). Complicated grief is characterized by protracted and severe grief and bereavement and includes factors such as second-guessing, self-blaming thoughts, and excessive avoidance reminders of the loss (Shear et al., 2016). Students grieving the loss of a loved one may also see an impact on their academic performance (Cousins, Servaty-Seib, & Lockman, 2017; Hedman, 2012).

Grieving students are at a greater risk than their peers for experiencing academic and social difficulties (Fajgenbaum, Chesson, & Lanzi, 2012). According to Varga (2015), 26% of graduate students at a large university in the southeastern United States reported experiencing the loss of a significant person in the prior 24 months. Graduate school is a stressful environment; adding the component of grief to the students affects academic effort and effectiveness (Stratton, Kellaway, & Rottini, 2007).

The purpose of this research study was to understand how bereavement and grief impacted graduate students at an online university. Recent studies relating to bereavement have concentrated on not only on the crisis of bereavement but include such

factors as resiliency, coping, and unexpected growth and transformation (Lumb, Beaudry, & Blanchard, 2017; Murrell, Jackson, Lester, & Hulsey, 2018; Walker & Balk, 2013).

The Walker and Balk (2013) researchers examined incidences and prevalence of bereavement in 117 college students at a Christian university by coding their bereavement stories. These researchers stated their results were a small first step in uncovering coping mechanisms of grief of students, stating their analysis of participant narratives disclosed the theme of coping, even for those struggling the most with their grief (Walker & Balk, 2013). However, while reviewing the literature, I noted a lack of literature about bereavement in the specific population of online graduate students and the effect of bereavement on academic success.

Background of the Study

Institutions of higher education strive to retain students, as doing so helps to maintain high graduation rates which are important to a university's reputation (Jobe & Lenio, 2014). Researchers have found that undergraduate students' grades and attrition rates may be affected when the students are experiencing bereavement; students have reported difficulties with studying and concentrating under those circumstances (Herberman-Mash, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2013). Alternatively, the self-sufficient quality of graduate studies, and the stress associated with the associated rigor of the programs, as well as the uncompromising competitiveness for postgraduate resources creates difficulties for doctoral students to connect with peers and faculty (Anderson, Cutright, & Anderson, 2013). Moreover, graduate students spend significant periods of time engaged in independent study, research, and testing of the premise of their investigation or

exploration (Anderson et al., 2013). These students, lacking social interactions with both university staff and their peers are vulnerable to withdrawing completely from their doctoral studies. As Rovai (2014) observed, such disconnections tend to reduce the sense of community, giving rise to feelings of disconnection, isolation, distraction, and lack of personal attention” (p. 2).

Further, with the rise of the Internet, options for studying at a distance have increased tremendously. However, there are some negative outcomes of studying online as students may feel they are ignored and that relationships are insincere (Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & Dipaola, 2006). These students are furthermore left to establish their own support networks, and feeling detached from their institutions, some may struggle to stay motivated. Online graduate students may withdraw due to a scarce sense of community and ensuing isolation, an inability to be self-directed, and inadequate mentorship and feedback (Ponton, 2014; Rovai, 2014).

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) developed a community of inquiry framework which suggests optimal learning occurs in a learning community where members of the community experience feelings of connectivity and belonging. Furthermore, Berry (2017) conducted a qualitative research study of 13 first-year online graduate students focused on finding if instructors provided students support. The results of the study revealed that instructors helped develop a sense of community by creating a warm and welcoming tone in the online forum and using specific technology to create a personalized experience (Berry, 2017).

Likewise, in one of the largest studies on experiences of doctoral students, Nettles and Millett (2006) concluded that attrition varied between 11% and 68%, depending on the branch of learning. Online graduate students have limited physical access to faculty and administration, contributing even more to the stressors of graduate work; several studies suggested that graduate students often struggle with isolation, disengagement, anxiety, and depression (Stubb, Pyhältö, & Lonka, 2011; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013).

Graduate students are under much pressure with a considerable volume of work required, continual academic evaluations, and lateral professional comparisons, which can occur when students compare their work and accomplishments to others in their field of study (Antoni, 2015). Cabrera-Caban, Garden, Reynoldson, and White (2016) reviewed five different studies to determine common stressors of graduate students, including academic workload, competing demands, finances, employment, loneliness, time management, and poor school/work life balance. Such stressors related to graduate school students resulted in decreased academic performance (Cabrera-Caban et al., 2016; Kernan, Bogart, & Wheat, 2011; Varga, 2015). Bereavement and grief are further stressors for graduate students. The negative cognitive impact of bereavement can jeopardize a student's ability to study, causing grades to suffer and resulting in the compromise of career dreams (Balk, 2011).

Within this qualitative research study, I used interviews with online graduate students who had recently experienced the death of a friend or family member to examine perceptions of how those deaths and the potential subsequent grief and bereavement impacted those students' graduate studies. Within the literature review, I discovered

research on grief and complicated grief related to undergraduate students (see Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Herberman-Mash et al., 2013; Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001), but few studies were found on the effects of grief and bereavement related to graduate students, especially those attending online universities. In addition, an interview with a professional grief counselor who has worked with graduate students during their grief experiences. participated in this study. There is emerging research, however, regarding online academic environments in general, but, again, most of the research I found has been conducted with undergraduate students earning their baccalaureate or associate degrees (see Boston et al., 2014).

In a study of undergraduate students, Balk et al. (2010) found that 22% to 30% of college students are within 12 months of having lost a close friend or family member. This study included 118 randomly selected students at a large midwestern university who were questioned to discover if they have prolonged grief disorder or complicated grief (Balk et al., 2010). Balk et al. found a substantial percentage of the students were bereaved at any given time and noted university assistance may aid in ensuring students' academic successes.

In another study, 815 bereaved undergraduate students were given the Inventory of Complicated Grief (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001), as well as an insomnia assessment; the researchers discovered bereaved insomniacs reported higher grief scores than noninsomniacs. Several specific sleep variables were found to be related to complicated grief symptomology (Hardison, Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005). Similarly, in a study of

73 adults, 93% of whom were undergraduate students, researchers found 21% of bereaved adults reported experiencing complicated grief (Herberman-Mash et al., 2013).

Within the research of graduate students, Cockrell and Shelley (2010) conducted a qualitative study of 141 doctoral students from four institutions and found that students reported satisfaction with mentors who taught them skills which would help them advance through the program. Studies relating to bereavement and graduate students were related to complicated grief and how grief, bereavement, and death anxiety affects graduate students differently than undergraduate students (Nienaber & Goedereis, 2015; Stroebe, Schut, & van den Bout, 2013). Nienaber and Goedereis (2015) found in their study on death and anxiety that graduate students' fear of death may affect them; however, this study was related to students who were currently experiencing bereavement and not fear of death. Exploring the experiences of this group of graduate students revealed unique information about how this population perceived the impact of bereavement on their graduate studies while remaining consistent with the purpose of other studies on grief and bereavement.

Complicated Grief and Prolonged Grief

Complicated grief and *prolonged grief* are terms sometimes used interchangeably (Jordan & Litz, 2014; Miller, 2012; Shear, Ghesquiere, & Glickman, 2013). Both the DSM-V and the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision* have taken steps to introduce a grief disorder as a new diagnostic entity, justifying the inclusion of prolonged grief disorder, but not complicated grief, as a new mental disorder

(Maercker et al., 2013; Maciejewski & Prigerson, 2017). Prolonged grief disorder thus is the procedural or medical term used when complicated grief is medically diagnosed.

Complicated grief may impair an individual's ability to perform academically, as it affects individuals with such symptoms as yearning for the deceased, emotional numbness, and agitation (Burke & Neimeyer, 2013), all of which negatively impact both a student's academic performance and personal development (Balk, 2008; Walker & Balk, 2013). Certain individuals who experience complicated grief are challenged with depression, anxiety, and stress-related diseases of the cardiovascular and immune systems (Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2016; Shear, 2015). Furthermore, complicated grief can be characterized by preoccupying and disabling symptoms which can persist, such as an inability to accept the death, intense yearning or avoidance, frequent reveries, deep sadness, crying, somatic distress, social withdrawal, and even suicidal ideation (Jordan & Litz, 2014; Miller, 2012).

Thus, whereas complicated grief includes a lengthening of the normal grieving process, it has distinct characteristics impairing mental and physical health and potentially impacting the quality of life of sufferers and their families (Newson, Boelen, Hek, Hofman, & Tiemeier, 2011). On the other hand, prolonged grief disorder (PGD) occurs when bereavement symptoms increase or grow rather than diminish over time (Jordan & Litz, 2014).

Like complicated grief, a PGD exhibits as sorrow and emotional pain, resulting from an inability to cope with the loss of a loved one, and potentially leading to insomnia, elevated suicidal ideation, health impairments, and reduced quality of life (Prigerson &

Maciejewski, 2016). Although a PGD is rare in undergraduate students (Balk et al., 2010), the prevalence of PGDs is known to increase with age (Newson et al., 2011); graduate students are typically an older demographic than undergraduate students, potentially placing them at a higher risk for developing a PGD (Goldsmith, Morrison, Vanderwerker, & Prigerson, 2008; Newson et al., 2011; Prigerson et al., 2009; Schaal, Dusingizemungu, Jacob, Neuner, & Elbert, 2012).

Researchers have suggested that grieving students might benefit from university counseling or other institutional interventions if they experience challenges in completing the everyday tasks of college life, including social interactions and academics (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). College counselors should be prepared to monitor students for prolonged and complicated grief symptoms after the loss of a loved one (Neimeyer et al., 2008). In this study, I sought to complement and add insight into this topic of complicated grief experienced by sharing perceptions of graduate students at one online university.

Problem Statement

Graduate students grieving the death of a family member or friend are at a greater risk than their peers for experiencing academic difficulties (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Roberts, 2016). The grieving process is complex and highly individualized; it is multilayered and encompasses intellectual, social, and psychological components of an individual's life (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Bowlby (1980) described four phases of the grieving process, including numbing, yearning, and searching for the lost figure; disorganization and despair; and finally, reorganization. Grief, mourning, and

bereavement are interrelated, and the terms grief, mourning, and bereavement are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are, in fact, quite different. Grief is how humans explain the internal experience of loss, whereas mourning is how humans demonstrate grief within the cultural and societal norms and rituals (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011).

Bereavement is the experience of having lost a loved one, while grief is how the various emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to the loss are described (Howarth, 2011). Although grief is a normal experience, there is a difference between what is considered normal grief and complicated grief (Neimeyer et al., 2008; Shear, 2015). The normal grieving process may result in feelings of sadness, anger, and difficulty concentrating (Gillies, Neimeyer, & Milman, 2013). Some people are unable to navigate through the grief process smoothly and experience complicated grief. Complicated grief is prolonged and affects the daily lives of persons, as well sometimes affecting the psychological and physical health of the individual. Manifestations include illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and disorders of the cardiovascular system (Marques et al., 2013; Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2016).

Grief and bereavement affecting academic performance may impact a student's ability to participate fully in an academic program, to learn, and eventually to graduate (Balk, 2001, 2008; Tedrick & Servaty-Seib, 2013). Tedrick and Servaty-Seib (2013) expressed that some bereaved students experience a decrease in their academic performance if they do not have an adequate support system or the skills to communicate their issues related to their grief and bereavement. Students who do not have a firm

intellectual foundation or who are not developmentally mature may have more issues with academic performance than students who are more mature developmentally (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the perceptions of online graduate students regarding the impact of bereavement on their academic performance. I further sought to understand descriptions from online graduate students relative to their perceptions of bereavement support and resources provided to them from their institution of higher learning. The participants of this study were graduate students attending one online university who were going through, or had recently gone through, the process of bereavement. A qualitative method was used in examining these perceptions of graduate students. A grief counselor was interviewed to add further information about potential interventions or assistance which could be provided to online bereaving students. Exploring the outcome of this research provides generalized information to higher education administrators, conceivably aiding them in implementing strategic initiatives to improve student support around bereavement, specifically in the realms of online learning and graduate students.

Research Questions

Research Question (RQ) 1: How do graduate students in an online university perceive the effect of bereavement on their academic performance and academic goals?

RQ2: How do graduate students describe the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations for students who are experiencing bereavement?

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study was Bronfenbrenner's 1977 ecological systems theory, introduced to explain human development. Ecological systems theory (EST) describes that human beings are part of multiple systems, each layered upon and interacting with the other. The complex interactions of each individual system can influence that very system, and, therefore, the behavior of human beings living within the system(s) is a complex recursive and cyclical process (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Furthermore, EST represents as a psychological theory of human development based on general systems theory, which similarly assumes all living organisms can be studied and understood due to complex interactions between their component elements (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). See Figure 1.

The levels of Bronfenbrenner's model are the following:

1. The *microsystem* is the immediate environment of the individual. It includes everyone the individual interacts with on a regular basis, including parents, siblings, neighbors, and peers.
2. The *mesosystem* is the interaction between members/components of the microsystem. The relationship between parents would be part of this system.
3. The *exosystem* is the border environment which will directly affect the immediate environment of the individual. This includes the local community, media, and parent's work environment.
4. The *macrosystem* is the overarching system which consists of culture, laws, economy, politics.
5. The *chronosystem* is the system of time and how certain variables affect the individual over time, including life events and changes in socioeconomic status.

(Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998)

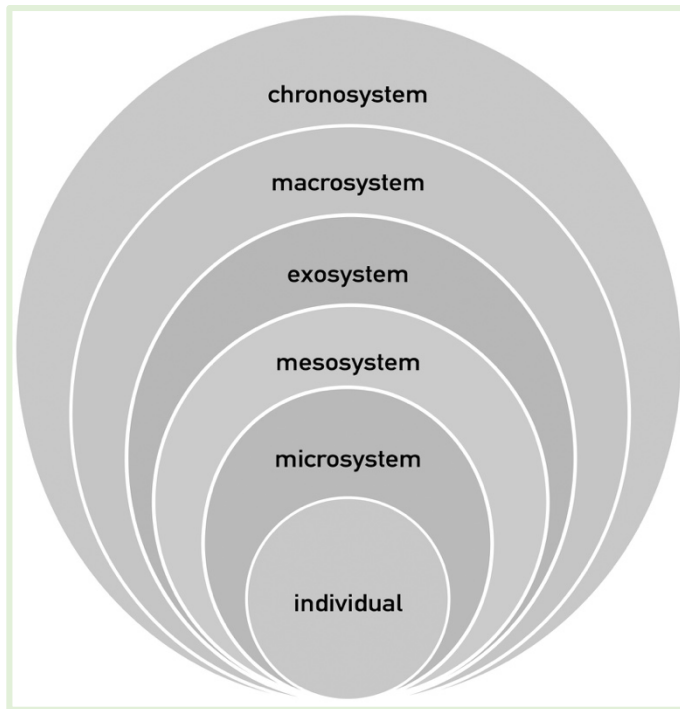


Figure 1.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Drawn by researcher and sourced from (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

There is a connection between EST and the ecological context of bereaving graduate students, namely the interplay between personal, interpersonal, and campus cultural factors (Walker, Hathcoat, & Noppe, 2012). Von Bertalanffy (1972) defined systems as “elements in a standing relationship” (p. 412). Systems theory examines the interrelatedness between arrangements of relationships and the complex layers of an individual's environment as well as how one change to a certain system can impact the all-inclusive system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Qualitative research has influenced the development of systems theory within the social realm, a part of the epistemological world as an organismic system (Myers & Avison, 2002).

All systems theories be they general (see Von Bertalanffy) or ecological (see Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005) are holistic in nature, as they view individual characteristics and behaviors in part by the system, or domain, in which they operate (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Such theories moreover align themselves with contextualism (Kramer & Bopp, 1989). EST is viewed here as a blend of general systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1972) and contextualism (Shields, Gilchrist, Nixon, Holland, & Thompson, 2013).

Whereas contextualism provides a background on how norms, culture, and other environmental influences aid in understanding human behavior (Tebes, 2005), EST explains how arrangements of influence overlap and impact an individual's experience both internally and externally (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Within the theoretical framework of EST, colleges and universities are considered systems, and this study of students' bereavement takes place within such a system of the online university. This ecological lens was used, therefore, in this study to examine the perceptions of graduate students and to provide a foundation to address graduate students' perceptions of bereavement. EST assisted in understanding patterns and principles which applied to this research as I explored how graduate students' perception of bereavement impacted their academic experiences as well as their interactions with the college system.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research provides an understanding of subjective experiences which can bring a researcher closer to the experiences of individuals by using deep descriptions

of the meaning of experience (Hays & Wood, 2011). In this research, I used a qualitative case study, a type of study which garnered information, via inquiry, regarding graduate students' perceptions of how bereavement affected their academic experiences. Within this study, it was important for me to allow participants to provide their perspectives of their bereavement within the context of the graduate online university.

The Case Study

Stake (1995) and Yin (2015) based their approach of discussion of case studies on a constructivist paradigm, positing that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective as it is furthermore built upon the premise of an individual's personal and social construction of reality (Searle, 2007). Use of the case study was considered a beneficial method as it included teamwork between the researcher and the participant, further empowering the participants to tell their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Through their stories, the participants of this study described their personal views of reality, enabling me to better understand the participants' perceptions and experiences (see Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). According to Yin (2015), a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer the how and why questions, and the researcher does not manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study. For example, within this study, where I sought to examine and understand perceptions of the bereaving participants, the study was not considered thorough without considering the context of the online university, and more specifically, at the graduate level. To fully understand the perceptions of the impact of bereavement of graduate students, I considered both the inquiry and the context.

The intrinsic case study. Stake's (1995) work has been influential in defining the case study approach to behavioral studies and has assisted me in understanding the three main types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. The choice of an *intrinsic* case study was appropriate for this study, as it is typically used to learn about a unique phenomenon, such as this study of perceptions of bereavement in graduate students at one online university (see Stake, 1995). An intrinsic case study is the study of a case, or a specific group, where the case itself is of primary interest (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). Furthermore, Yin (2015) clarified that a case study is appropriate when the researcher is unable to manipulate the behavior of the participants when uncovering context relevant to the study. In making the decision to select the intrinsic case study, I reflected on its suitability for this study.

In an intrinsic case study, the case, or the group of cases, is selected on their own merit (Stake, 1995), and is appropriate not because it is typical of any other cases, but because of its individuality, which was my interest. In a textbook example of an intrinsic case study, Hellström, Nolan, and Lundh (2005) studied an older married couple living together, both with dementia, to explore how such an illness might have impacted their understanding of their lives and their relationships. In the same manner, I studied the unique perceptions of graduate students, the purpose of this qualitative study, which was to describe the perceptions of online graduate students regarding the impact of bereavement on their academic performance. I further sought to understand descriptions from online graduate students relative to their perceptions of bereavement support and resources provided to them from their institution of higher learning.

An intrinsic case study was optimal for this study as I was not seeking to develop theory, embody other cases, or demonstrate a specific problem or characteristic (see Stake, 1995). This study was of precise and genuine interest to me, as Stake (1995) described intrinsic case studies.

Definitions

Academic self-efficacy: Academic self-efficacy is an individual's confidence that they can achieve a specific academic goal or task (Putwain, Sander, & Larkin, 2013).

Bereavement: Bereavement is the time when family members or friends may experience grief after the death of a loved one. Bereavement sometimes may include incidents relating to cognitive, behavioral, and religious or spiritual experiences which could possibly become stressful (Jones, Puntillo, Donesky, & McAdam, 2018).

Bereavement guilt: Bereavement guilt is an emotional reaction in grieving when an individual recognizes they have failed to live up to their own standards and expectations in relation to the deceased person or the death of the deceased person (Li et al., 2014).

Case studies: A case study is a firsthand inquiry which explores a current experience within its real world context and is used in studies when the research question asks "how" or "why" (Yin, 2015).

Complicated grief: Complicated grief is a prolongation of the normal grieving process with distinct characteristics which impair mental and physical health and can potentially greatly impact the quality of life of sufferers and their family (Newson et al., 2011).

Contextualism: Contextualism explains how environmental influence, including norms and culture, are essential to understanding human behavior (Tebes, 2005).

Disenfranchised grief: Disenfranchised grief is that which is not acknowledged by society (Doka & Martin, 2002).

Ecological systems theory (EST): This refers to the Bronfenbrenner model of EST where there are five types of systems or environmental contexts within which development occurs: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005).

Graduate student: A graduate student in this study is defined as students enrolled in a master's or doctoral program at an online university.

Grief: Grief is a response to bereavement including a variety of psychological and physiological symptoms which develop over time (Shear, 2015).

Online university: An online university provides programs where students can earn a degree or credits primarily using an Internet connected computer, rather than attend in a traditional campus setting.

Prolonged grief disorder (PGD): PGD occurs when an individual continues to yearn for the deceased and when an individual has difficulty accepting the death. PGD is associated with emotional pain and difficulty engaging in activities (Bryant et al., 2014; Bryant et al., 2018).

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts researchers must accept but which they cannot verify due to limited statistical support (Nkwake, 2013). Assumptions are a necessary element in

any type of research because they are required to facilitate and conduct the study (Simon & Goes, 2013). The greatest assumption is that participants in this study would be reliable historians of their own experiences capable of providing accurate historical information on how they were affected by their loss (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This research was conducted via means of a series of ten interviews, and an assumption was made that this research sample would be representative of the population about which more broad inferences might be made (see Banerjee, & Chaudhury, 2010). I further assumed that the participant interviews would be undertaken consistently and without bias (see Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). As noted, it was assumed that each participant would respond honestly and without malice or favoritism toward the research process. As a determination of sample size was established to be ten participants, the reality of reaching the minimum level was also an assumption. As a series of interviews was used for this research, I assumed the process would be implemented with minimal technical or other flaws.

This research was additionally based on the assumption that the primary research instrument (me) would accurately record and report the information collected in this study. This authenticity included accurate and objective descriptions of those participating in the research (see Polit & Beck, 2012).

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations of a study are those characteristics which result from limitations in the scope of the study and arise via conscious exclusionary or inclusionary decisions made during development of the study plan. In other words, delimitations result from

specific choices made by the researcher. Delimiting factors include the choice of objectives, the research questions, variables of interest, and the theoretical perspectives adopted (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). Within this study, the first delimitation was the determination of the problem to be explored. The purpose statement explains the intent of the study, distinctly setting out proposed accomplishments, and furthermore included a clear understanding of what the study did not cover (Simon & Goes, 2013).

Additional types of delimitations, or choices in a study, include questions, variables, theoretical perspectives, the theoretical framework, and the population chosen to investigate (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). These research decisions are based on design options chosen *vis-à-vis* the planning and strategic decision-making of the research project (Simon & Goes, 2013). Delimitations of this research, related to my choices, included the focus on a purposeful sample of participants who met the inclusion criteria (see Palinkas et al., 2015). The graduate students who participated in the study were students who experienced a loss within the prior 2 years, and who were currently enrolled in a graduate program at one online university. Two years is a period when the individual is possibly still coping with their loss (Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008). By definition, all these components are considered delimitations, or on a more positive note, boundaries contributing to containment, and subsequently control, of the results of the study (Sargeant, 2012; Simon & Goes, 2013).

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses in a study beyond a researcher's control (Cunha & Miller, 2014). Limitations often flow from methodology and design choices of

a given study (Simon & Goes, 2013). A major limitation is time, and within a research project, such as this one, a study conducted over a certain interval of time, presented only a glimpse of reality, an experience dependent on conditions occurring during that particular time.

Another key limitation is a potential lack of seriousness or determination from certain participants of this study. Participants may lack resolve or even be uncertain of confidentiality (Sargeant, 2012; Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). Participants in this study may have been affected by their bereavement in such a way which may have impacted the reported experiences. The emotional nature of the study may have resulted in the participants not being able to share their experiences (see Simon, 2011). There is an explanation in Chapter 3 of how sensitive issues were handled if they arose.

Each of these limitations can be viewed as minimal because of mechanisms such as member checking, which eliminated problematic or uncertain interview data. This study's greatest limitation was its suggestion that the participants, who were all volunteers, were asked not to focus on their expectations of the perceived outcome of the study. Furthermore, any themes and patterns discovered in this study may not be generalizable to the broader population of online graduate students because of the small sample size of ten participants; themes or patterns identified in this study are specific to this study only and are intended to answer the research questions regarding perceptions of bereavement in graduate students at one online university (see Sargeant, 2012). Additional issues relating to generalizability are addressed in Chapter 3.

There was a concern, and a possible further limitation, with building rapport and setting a comfortable ambiance for the interview; additionally, the participants may have been uncomfortable with the technology or may have lacked the technical expertise or access to the technology required for the study. Therefore, a further limitation of this study was the use of an audio-only electronic interview. This type of interview, with the inability to observe the participant's body language, resulted in the interviewer missing nonverbal cues (see Cater, 2011). This type of environment may have been more distracting for participants than in person face-to-face interviews because the participants may not have been able to provide undivided attention (see Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Furthermore, participants in online interviews may be self-conscious or feel nervous because of being recorded; I was not able to reassure such emotions as easily as in a face-to-face interview (see Hay-Gibson, 2009).

A further limitation was that participants were required to have the necessary technical expertise to be included in the interview; certain individuals were excluded due to technological barriers (see O'Connor, Madge, Shaw, & Wellens, 2017). However, participants in this study were online graduate students who, for the most part, were comfortable using technology.

Significance

This study extends prior research by Balk et al. (2010) who found grief was “a defining issue” for a large percentage of undergraduates (p. 6). His study revealed evidence that bereavement among college students sometimes influences academic performance, including dropout rates and grades (Balk, 2008; Balk et al., 2010).

Graduate students are an important segment of the university and the institution's population, and the specific needs and concerns of this population should be addressed. Benshoff, Cashwell, and Rowell (2015) explained that the recent increase in online graduate programs is representative of the efforts to meet the needs of adult graduate students who may have to make different decisions relating to work, their family, and other facets of their lives. Bereavement research can be used to inform grief and bereavement counseling and specifically inform universities and college counseling centers with how graduate students perceive bereavement impacts their academic experience. The need for students to complete graduate school programs justifies the need for grief and bereavement counseling because many graduate students will experience bereavement during their time as graduate students. Thus, universities and colleges which become informed about bereavement and prepare to provide services for graduate students experiencing bereavement will be able to support those students. I was able to identify perceptions of how bereavement impacts students' performance and identify critical areas to continue research to inform colleges and universities on bereavement and its influence on graduate students. There have been many studies on how bereavement affects undergraduate students, but I found little research with a focus on graduate students and the impact of bereavement on academic performance. University systems can benefit from having a focus on understanding perceptions of the underlying factors behind student performance and academic achievement (Galbraith, Merrill, & Kline, 2012).

Social change occurs when changes are made in society which differ from the status quo. One of the important goals of research is the improvement in the quality of life for people or to address the needs of a particular community or organization (Kleiner, Kerstetter, & Green, 2012). The results of this study can promote social change by changing the way colleges and universities provide grief/bereavement counseling or additional resources for students who are experiencing bereavement. This research addressed the need for bereavement interventions for graduate students and the need for faculty training in bereavement counseling. Through this research, I demonstrated the need for counseling, which could improve the academic performance of bereaved graduate students and increase the university's retention. This study can help inform that the practice of counseling and grief counseling may lead to change in policy structure of universities. Academic institutions can benefit from providing effective assistance to grieving graduate students, which may improve academic success (see Cox, Dean, & Kowalski, 2015).

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the development of studies on grief, bereavement, and complicated grief. Despite existing research on challenges, as well as historical information on grief and bereavement pertaining to undergraduate students, there has been little research on how bereavement impacts graduate students, and even less information on graduate students who were completing their programs in an online environment. Complicated or prolonged grief can harm mental and physical health and

can potentially greatly impact the quality of life for those sufferers and their families (Newson et al., 2011).

Upcoming in Chapter 2, I examine current literature on this topic. The purpose of this literature review was to not only recognize existing gaps but to identify ways universities, faculty, and counseling centers can prepare to meet the needs and understand the significance of bereavement and how bereavement potentially impacts graduate students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Recently, the number of studies related to bereavement on college campuses has increased. Factors contributing to this increase in research include an upsurge of students' use of online counseling centers and deaths due to violence and accidents (Cupit, Martin, Parikh, Servaty-Seib, & Walker, 2016). This study adds to the body of research in the area of bereavement and its effect on academic achievement. This, in turn, can help to shed light on the need for grief counseling programs at counseling centers in colleges and universities to support students.

Graduate students often experience the loss of significant people in their lives while pursuing their education. Neimeyer et al. (2008) described the grief which college students experience as a "silent epidemic" (p. 28). The inattentiveness to this stressful situation on campuses and universities is why grief and bereavement have been described as silent (Balk, 2001; Lord & Gramling, 2014). Another component of this problem is the use of the online environment, which isolates students from their peers and mentors/teachers. This problem is especially significant since the population of graduate students taking online courses is growing. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2017 reported total enrollment in postbaccalaureate degree programs was 2.9 million students in fall 2015. The NCES (2017) is further projecting between 2015 and 2026, postbaccalaureate enrollment will increase by 12% (from 2.9 million to 3.3 million students).

A 2013 NCES report revealed a higher percentage of graduate students 30 years old and older taking distance education classes than younger students. The projected number of graduate students who will be working toward their degree online will be 5 million in the year 2020 (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Online education is appealing to many graduate students because they take courses without the confines of being limited to a specific day or time (Marshall, Greenberg, & Machun, 2012). Other researchers discovered nearly 26 million students were enrolled in fully online programs and the share of graduate students enrolled in fully online programs is approximately 22% of the 55 million students who take online courses (Johnson, Adams-Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2015).

Several studies have been conducted on grief and bereavement as it relates to undergraduate students (Balk, 2008; Currier, Neimeyer, & Berman, 2008; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2011; Walker, Gewecke, Cupit, & Fox, 2015). There have been fewer studies on how graduate students experience loss due to death. Cupit et al. (2016) expressed that bereaved students experience certain challenges, including insomnia, problems concentrating, depression, and relational and emotional problems. They related the ecological context of the grieving student to EST and grief relating to bereavement over a loss during the college years (Cupit et al., 2016). The ecological context provided a way to examine grieving as an interchange between personal, interpersonal, and campus cultural factors (Cupit et al., 2016). One of the assumptions of the study was that students who are mismatched with their needs and the campus culture may withdraw or not complete their program because they may not fit in (Cupit et al.,

2016). This disconnect with the culture of the university may be heightened if a graduate student is experiencing bereavement. Cupit et al. (2016) found differences in how genders express grief and further discovered that many students who participated in the study found their priorities toward college changed due to their period of bereavement. However, there is little research on how bereavement affects graduate students and how students experiencing bereavement effect the ecological system, which is the school or university they attend. There appears to be even less research on how online students or graduate students' ecological systems are impacted by bereavement.

In this study, I attempted to understand how graduate students experiencing complicated grief perceive the effect of this grief on their academic performance. The focus of qualitative research was on the perceptions of the participants' experiences and how they make sense of their lives (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). Graduate students provided information to help me understand their realities in relation to bereavement. Included in the literature are topics of systems theory and bereavement, complicated grief and bereavement, disenfranchised grief, meaning making and sense making of bereavement, cognitive effects of bereavement, and bereavement and graduate students.

The search strategy for this literature review was comprised of journal articles and books discovered via the academic databases of SocINDEX with Full Text, Psych INFO, Sage Premier, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Central, and Education Source. Most sources were accessed through the Walden online library. Keywords used in the database searches included *college students and bereavement*, *college students and grief*, *complicated grief*, *meaning making and grief*, *sense making and grief*, *systems theory and*

grief, systems theory and bereavement, academic performance and grief, academic performance and stress, and academic performance and graduate students.

The following issues were reviewed to provide known research relating to bereavement and graduate students: theories related to bereavement, cognitive effects of bereavement, meaning making and sense making of bereavement, complicated grief, disenfranchised grief, bereavement and academic performance, systems theory and bereavement, depression, anxiety and stress and academic performance, grief and mental illness, and accommodations and bereavement.

Bereavement and Grief

Bereavement is a normal and uncomplicated response to loss where symptoms usually end within weeks or months of the death of a loved one, peer, or friend (Kersting, Brähler, Glaesmer, & Wagner, 2011). Bereavement and grief are sometimes used interchangeably, but there is a difference between them. Grief is a multidimensional experience resulting from a significant loss of person and involves cognitive, emotional, physical, social, behavioral, and spiritual components of a person's life (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). The debates continue about whether bereavement should be considered a factor in diagnosis of major depression.

Historical Perspective

This section provides the reader with a brief timeline clarifying the definition and diagnoses of bereavement, including the American Psychological Association's response to bereavement and grief, bereavement, and cognition (American Psychological Association [APA], 1980, 2013). The first empirical study into acute grief was

undertaken by Lindemann in 1944; since that time, modern studies of grief and bereavement have greatly increased. The topic of how individuals cope with grief and bereavement remains a controversial and difficult one (Pies, 2014).

Bereavement first appeared in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-3; APA, 1980). A difference was distinguished between uncomplicated and complicated grief in that same edition. In the DSM-3, an individual who experienced marked functional impairment and psychomotor retardation was considered bereaved, which may be obscured by the development of major depression (APA, 1980). The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) modified the diagnostic criteria and removed the 2-month waiting period to diagnose major depression and allowed a bereaved individual to be diagnosed with major depression after 2 weeks of experiencing symptoms. The removal of the bereavement exclusion resulted in debate about the socially appropriate length of time for bereaved individuals to grieve.

Cognitive Effects of Bereavement

Cognition is related to the relationship between an individual's emotions and behaviors, which include an individual's cognitive evaluations about themselves, the world, and the future (Beck, 1976). Cognition can be defined as the ability to sort out and store information and to find solutions to problems, which is synonymous with learning (Egan, Neely-Barnes, & Combs-Orme, 2011). Grief and bereavement have been found to include behavioral changes which affect, cognition, and physiological states (Weiss, 2008). Bereavement can also impact cognitive functioning related to short-term and long-term memory, both of which are vital for graduate students for effective

achievement of their studies. In a study of 211 older adults, Rosnick, Small, and Burton (2010) found that bereavement was associated with poorer memory performance.

Bereavement and Academic Performance

Bereavement has been found to support clinical impressions that bereaved students are at risk for decreased academic performance (Roberts, 2016; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) studied 227 bereaved college students and found academic performance was impaired, and the students had lower grade point averages, particularly in the semester in which the death occurred. Other researchers found that complicated grief resulted in mental illness and cardiovascular problems, which resulted negatively affecting a student's academic success (Balk, 2008; Neimeyer et al., 2008). Academic goals are affected by the experience of a death/loss, and the impact of the loss leads to decreased educational performance, academic probation, academic dismissal, or voluntary withdrawal (Balk, 2001; LaGrand, 1981; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). The effect of the death of a close friend or relative on academic and social integration "acts as a catalyst for students to re-evaluate their commitments and may lead to decreased educational performance, academic probation, academic dismissal, or voluntary withdrawal" (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006, p. 224).

A connection between stress and academic performance exists among graduate students who spend an inordinate amount of time completing academic work to the exclusion of personal, social, and cultural interests in their lives (Hurd, Tan, & Loeb, 2016). Learning and memory can be affected by stress (Rafidah et al., 2009). Because stress is related to academic performance, it would benefit the graduate students if

campus counseling centers or online counselors provided stress management assistance specifically targeted for stress related to issues such as finances, academic work, and social and cultural stressors (Fox, 2008). Hyun, Quinn, Madon and Lustig (2006) conducted a study of over 3,000 graduate students, and more than 1,500 reported experiencing stress-related problems during the prior year.

Graduate students have complex lives, which may warrant special attention by graduate school counselors and administrators. Counseling center directors have reported an increase in crises on campuses, which require an immediate response, including learning disabilities, psychiatric medication use, illicit drug use, alcohol abuse, problems related to earlier sexual abuse, eating disorders, and violence and sexual abuse on campus (Gallagher, 2012). One way in which graduate school counselors and administrators can address challenges faced by these students is by providing grief and bereavement counseling.

Theoretical Foundation

As noted, the theoretical foundation for this study was Bronfenbrenner's 1977 EST, which describes how human beings are part of multiple systems, each layered upon and interacting with the other. EST represents as a psychological theory of human development based on general systems theory, which similarly assumes all living organisms can be studied and understood as a result of multifaceted relationships between the essential elements (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). This section provides an historical timeline of various theories which have set the foundation for EST and this researcher's

ability to use EST to explore bereavement and grief of graduate students at one online university.

Melancholia

Freud's early 20th century essay on mourning and melancholia described mourning as a psychic process in which the loss of an object or ideal results in the withdrawal of libido from that object or ideal; melancholia is thus mourning without end (Freud, Strachey, & Freud, 1900). Freud further enlightened that the object turns in to the ego and begins a turning away from the external world of the exterior social world to the internal world of the psyche (Freud, 2005; Freud et al., 1900). The author described individuals who cannot accept loss have a narcissistic identification with the loss object where they sometimes experience a profound lasting sadness which he called *melancholia*. According to Freud, melancholia occurred when an individual was unable to move on and turns against him/herself in self-reproach to an extent which could lead to suicide. Freud defined this melancholia as an unconscious response to an inability to mourn or successfully experience bereavement (Freud, 2005; Freud et al., 1900).

Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief is a concept used by Lindemann (1944, 1991) to explain the assumption that wives of military personnel during war-time began their grief work before the actual loss of their husbands because of the overwhelming threat of losing their spouse, forcing them to detach that bond. In the 1970s, the concept of anticipatory grief described caregivers receiving a forewarning or expecting the impending death as opposed to bereavement relating to an actual death (Nielsen, Neergaard, Jensen, Bro, &

Guldin, 2016). These researchers found that grief during caregiving can be interpreted as a risk factor for poor bereavement adaptation.

Thanatological

Thanatology is the interdisciplinary field of research which includes biological, medical, forensic, psychological, and social perspectives concerning the end of an individual's life (Anderson et al., 2013). The field spans discourse in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, social work, medicine, nursing, health education, philosophy, anthropology, and religious studies. Kübler-Ross (1973) made a significant contribution to thanatology research by explaining grief and bereavement in terms of an individual's own demise (Doka, Neimeyer, Wittkowski, Vallerga, & Currelley, 2016).

Until the mid-20th century many persons considered death an 'off-limits' subject, even to the extent that death was an offensive topic for scholarly research, public education, or even public discussion. Eventually, however, the initiatives of several innovators challenged this attitude, including Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (Fleming, Farquhar, Brayne, & Barclay, 2016). Kübler-Ross's main contention is that while death remains frightening, and that this fear of death is universal, change has occurred in how we are able to speak about death, and the manner in which we treat dying individuals. Grief is associated with many emotions, including shock and loss, but also that of anger. This complexity of emotions will affect any individual who has lost a loved one, in particular the graduate student studying in an online setting, wherein there is often already-established isolation and loneliness (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010).

Attachment Theory

The current research is more closely related to the post loss study of bereavement expressed in Bowlby's attachment theory, which defined grief as an adaptation response explaining how attachment bonds are developed early in life. These attachments are instinctive and related to feelings of security and survival (Bowlby, 1980). Attachment theory is one of the primary paradigms for understanding how humans adapt to bereavement (Currier, Mallot, Martinez, Neimeyer, & Sandy, 2013). Bowlby (1969) reviewed how attachment and avoidance is related to prolonged or complicated grief (Bowlby, 1969, 1982).

Stage Theories

Other theories describe how individuals adapt to bereavement or how they move through specific stages of bereavement. An example of the use of stages to describe the bereavement process is Parkes' (1998) explanation of four phases experienced during bereavement which occurs after grief: shock or numbness, yearning and pining, disorganization and despair, and recovery. Parkes described these phases as not being linear and described that the phases might be experienced multiple times and in no identified sequence (1998).

Dual Process Model

The dual process model (DPM) of coping with bereavement was developed to better describe coping and to predict poor versus good adaptation to bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). This is a coping model which explains that if coping is effective then suffering and the physical and mental illness associated with bereavement

should be minimal (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). The DPM identifies two categories of stressors associated with bereavement, namely, loss-oriented, and restoration-oriented. Loss-orientation is concentrated on some aspect of the loss experience and includes grief work. Restoration-orientation focuses on the secondary stressors which are a consequence of bereavement, such as rethinking one's line and reorientation to a world which does not include the deceased person. The DPM explains oscillation between the two stress orientations to cope with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

Task Model of Bereavement

Worden (2008) looked at mourning and bereavement with a task-oriented framework where he used a timeline to describe the grief process. Worden's framework has been called the Task Model of Bereavement. Worden produced four phases of mourning therapists might use to develop interventions to work with the bereaved. His four phases of mourning are: death or accepting the reality of the death, shock or experiencing the pain, disorganization or adapting to the new environment, and reorganization or reinvesting emotional energy (Worden, 2008).

Complicated Grief

Some individuals taking longer to deal with the loss of their loved ones might manifest their sorrow via both mental and physical symptoms. Complicated grief, or PGD is identified in persons for whom grief and bereavement impair their mental and physical health as well as impacting their daily lives and the lives of their families (Lichtenthal, Cruess, & Prigerson, 2004). PGD or complicated grief is described as an

intense and prolonged yearning for the deceased which disrupts normal functioning and is present for at least 6 months after the death (Bryant et al., 2014; Bryant et al., 2018).

Individuals suffering complicated grief may experience symptoms such as a difficulty accepting the death, bitterness, loss of trust, emotional numbness, and difficulty in reengaging in activities (Prigerson et al., 2008). Associated with complicated grief is the difficulty moving forward with life and the feelings that one's life has become meaningless (Prigerson et al., 1995). Students with complicated grief may experience issues with their personal development and academic success.

Currier, Holland, and Neimeyer (2006) indicated that individuals who are experiencing grief or bereavement due to loss resulting from violent means may be at a higher risk for psychological suffering in the grieving process. Deaths which are a result of homicide, suicide, or other violence have been found to be associated with greater Complicated Grief symptomology and are distressing enough to activate attachment-related concerns (Meier, Carr, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2013). Burke, Ippolito, McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, and Roberts (2011) found 56% of homicidally bereaved African Americans experienced complicated grief. Another study found approximately 70% of suicide survivors experienced complicated grief (Mitchell, Kim, Prigerson, & Mortimer-Stephens, 2004). These studies resulted in the conclusion that individuals who have experienced loss of a loved one through violence were more at risk for complicated grief. However, other studies reported null findings when researching complicated grief and violent death (Feigelman, Gorman, & Jordan, 2009; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; van der Houwen, Schut, van den Bout, Stroebe, & Stroebe, 2010).

Coping With Loss

The death of a loved one ranks high on the list of potentially life-changing and life-identity events (Currier et al., 2008). There have been studies focusing on how students make meaning of bereavement (Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, & Keesee, 2010; Park, 2010) including how they benefit finding and understanding through religion as potentially helping to cope with bereavement (Burke, et al., 2011), and disenfranchised grief, where studies clarify how to understand and explain bereavement (Walker et al., 2015). Raskin (2002) posited that humans endeavor to find significant ideas to help them organize their lives and ultimately understand, anticipate, and to try to control their world.

There has been a significant amount of research addressing how individuals construct meaning in dealing with grief and bereavement (Dennis, Garner, & Kunkel, 2014; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Park, 2010). The process of making meaning from a loss includes the way individuals restore a sense of the world as meaningful and worthwhile aiding them to see their world and their life as worthwhile (Park, 2010). Understanding the loss results from the process of engaging the challenge of the death poses to the orienting system in the context of death-related loss (Neimeyer, 2016). Dennis et al. (2014) explained that meaning making and sense making of loss is the method used to manage distress relating to grief and bereavement. Scholars have examined meaning theories relating to existentialism, spirituality, stress, and bereavement (MacKinnon, et al., 2014). A *meaning-reconstruction model*, used in bereavement psychology, combines narratives, social constructivism, family systems, and trauma

theories to suggest that rebuilding, reinterpreting, and making sense of life stories following death benefits mourners (Neimeyer, 2010).

Another method used by individuals dealing with loss is *benefit-finding* which is when bereaved people look for positive implications of the loss. Benefit-finding is a process where the bereaved person uncovers a hidden or surprise benefit within the consequences of the loss, such as having more meaningful relationships, making better grades in honor of the deceased, living life more fully, changing priorities, or an increased sense of resilience or personal strength (Li et al., 2015). One study's researchers found that benefit-finding was associated with positive experiences for those dealing with a loss within the prior six months and was conversely related to negative adjustment for those who experienced a death long ago (Michael & Snyder, 2005).

Religion

Religion is one of the primary ways people make sense of the world (Park, 2005). In fact, a qualitative study on college student bereavement found religion as 1 of the 10 most important coping resources for participants (Seah & Wilson, 2011). Several studies investigated coping with bereavement using religion and religious practices (McIntosh & Drapeau, 2017; Stroebe, 2004; Wortmann & Park, 2008). Wortmann and Park (2008), examining three empirical studies, concluded that overall religion/spirituality had a positive relationship with adjustment to bereavement.

Religion is another coping skill often used by bereaved college students (Stroebe, 2004). One of the tools used to measure religious coping is the (RCOPE), a multidimensional measurement tool, which determines negative and positive ways

religion is used to cope with life stressors (Stroebe et al., 2001). Not all researchers agree religious coping is effective for managing stress and bereavement. Becker et al. (2007) conducted research and concluded the role religion plays in coping is inconsistent. This study's researchers, using 1517 participants, discovered various coping methods for bereavement across varied populations. The researchers discussed that most studies involving spirituality or religion as coping with bereavement were cross-sectional studies* and other influences or confounding variables could be relevant. Becker et al. (2007) challenged researchers to conduct studies on spirituality or religion which have a control group, such as a longitudinal study, to compare coping and adjustment between those who hold religious or spiritual beliefs and those who do not (Becker et al., 2007).

*[Note: Longitudinal study designs compare data from one or more groups at several points over time and include a *control* condition and random assignment to conditions. Cross-sectional studies designs, on the other hand, compare data from an experimental group with those from a control group at *one* point in time. Correlational studies assess the co-variation between two variables: for example, co-variation of functional or structural properties of the brain and a behavioural variable, such as reported stress (Babbie, 2016; Shapero, Greenberg, Pedrelli, de Jong, & Desbordes, 2018).]

Disenfranchised Grief

Grief is not consistently considered socially acceptable. Doka (1989) described *disenfranchised grief* as pain and sorrow which is not deemed as socially acceptable in the norms of our society. The author further explained which disenfranchised grief is

grief where there is no social acknowledgement of the mourners. This term was later used to describe grief related to certain kinds of death or loss. Disenfranchised grief also refers to that which is not recognized or is dismissed by others (Doka & Martin, 2002). Each society decides social norms about grief as well as the way people are expected to grieve (Doka & Martin, 2002).

Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological approach of development describes the four levels of development which may help us to understand the bereavement experience for graduate students. Bronfenbrenner (2005) studied overlapping systems of influence ranging from an individual's most central experiences to their most peripheral ones to explain factors in human development and behavior. Context separates Bronfenbrenner's development *ecology theory* from other theories, such as social psychology, sociology, or anthropology (Christensen, 2016; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). According to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) classic ecological theory, the microsystem is the cultural blueprint of an ecological system, which includes organizations, as well as the social, and political contexts. The author further expressed that the microsystem is related to the student, peers, family, and community.

Whereas the microsystem is the environment wherein direct social interaction takes place and the individual performs an active role (Christensen, 2016), the *mesosystem* describes the relations between microsystems or connections between contexts (Christensen, 2016). An explanation of the mesosystem and graduate students includes the way a student's social interactions in the past influences his/her current

behavior as a graduate student. For instance, graduate students who felt rejected by their family may have difficulty adjusting to the social culture of the university or college.

The *exosystem* is the relationship between a social system where the individual does not have an active role and the individual's immediate context (Christensen, 2016). In the case of graduate students at an online university, the exosystem will be the social context, which affects graduate students through the microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The *macrosystem* describes the overall social culture in which a specific individual resides (Christensen, 2016). Some examples of the macrosystem include socio-economic status, poverty, and ethnicity. Death or grief is part of the *chronosystem* related to consistency or change in the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The developmental level of the graduate student, the closeness of his/her relationship to the deceased, and the how the student has both matured socially and has integrated academically into the college community are part of this system; all will have an impact on their academic experience while in graduate school. Graduate students can benefit from becoming socially and academically integrated within the operation of the university or college system. This will result in congruence between the culture of the institution, the needs of the student, academic support, and sense of membership in the college or university community (Cupit et al., 2016).

Online Learning

Online learning uses the Internet to deliver instructions to learners who are separated by time or distance. Online learning provides access to learning anywhere and anytime (Holmes & Gardner, 2006). Students enroll in online classes generally due to

scheduling flexibility, lower costs, and convenience. An article by Finkle and Masters (2014) traced the roots of online education back in time to a course launched by Electronic University Network in 1984. Subsequently, in the 1990s and 2000s, online education experienced slow, but incremental, progress. Some of the more notable developments included: asynchronous learning technology, Blackboard developed in 1997; open source websites, such as Wikipedia created in 2001; and the video hosting website, YouTube, started in 2005, freely available for all to upload and view audiovisual content. Gradually the technology advancement in synchronous technology, with web and video conferencing, became instrumental in a surge of online education creation (Finkle & Masters, 2014).

Attention was brought to the possibilities of online learning of the masses (massive open online courses, also known as MOOCs), when Coursera, founded by two Stanford University professors in 2011, reached 1.7 million students within 2 years of its inception. Once again, several professors at Stanford created Udacity, another MOOC, later that same year, capturing 150,000 students for their course offerings in fall of 2011 (Kamenetz, 2012; Toven-Lindsey, Rhoads, & Lozano, 2015). The East coast edX, a joint venture formed by Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2012, had 370,000 students sign up for their first course offered online (Amemado, & Manca, 2017; Bates & LaBrecque, 2017; Kamenetz, 2012; Raspopovic, Cvetanovic, Medan, & Ljubojevic, 2017). The impact and effectiveness of these widespread and easily accessible learnings is still not completely recognized.

Nonetheless, these three leading universities (Stanford, Harvard, and MIT) offered high-quality teaching by elite professors from top-tier research schools, free to anyone in the world with computer access and an Internet connection. Contrasting to courses offered by brick and mortar schools, which cost students tens of thousands of dollars per year, it was no wonder the wide-ranging attention these establishments received; the popularity of online learning began to prevail in higher education (Keene, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme, 2013). More recently, adaptive learning, personalized instruction, game-based learning, and collaborative/ social learning models are shaping the current online learning landscape, along with EPub 3, which is transforming e-books into interactive learning experiences (Bjerede, 2014; Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2014; Hennig, 2016; Yan Quan & Briggs, 2015).

On the other hand, and although online learning has such benefits, there are potential shortcomings. These challenges involve a lack of personal interaction between instructors and students, as well as peer-to-peer connections and exchanges. Students who are learning in the online environment may have feelings of isolation, lack of support, and difficulty maintaining their schedules (Croft et al., 2010). For the online student who is also grieving from the loss of a loved one, these factors can be even more intensified.

Graduate Students and Bereavement

Okahana and Zhou (2017) in their study of graduate and enrollment degrees reported more than 1.78 million graduate students were enrolled in graduate certificate, education specialist, master's, or research doctoral programs in U.S. graduate schools in

the fall of 2015. Graduate students are no longer considered merely an extension of the undergraduate population. Benshoff et al. (2015) declared that “more than any other single consideration, challenges relating to managing multiple, and often competing roles, responsibilities, and expectations may be the most universal and defining characteristic of graduate student life” (p. 84). Universities and colleges can benefit from assessing the needs of graduate students to enhance their academic experience. Graduate students may have challenges relating to managing multiple roles, which can contribute to additional stress during graduate school (Mazumdar, Gogoi, Buragohain, & Haloi, 2012). Graduate students often sacrifice time, income, social activities, and relationships while pursuing graduate studies (Benshoff et al., 2015). These sacrifices may lead to voids in their lives, which may ultimately lead to graduate students seeking counseling.

Graduate students differ from undergraduate students when it comes to seeking assistance from school counseling centers. Online graduate students are different from traditional graduate students because they do not have physical access to support from professors, academic advisors, and professional counselors (Varga, 2015). McCarthy, Bruno, and Sherman (2010) found that graduate students typically do not seek support when they need it. Conversely, another study found that graduate students were more likely than undergraduate students to seek mental health care services (Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). Wyatt and Oswalt (2013) highlighted differences in stress-related issues within graduate and undergraduate student populations while suggesting that counseling centers study these differences to provide appropriate services to graduate students.

Varga used the *Holistic Impact of Bereavement* study which suggested that graduate students are affected by grief in the same six dimensions as undergraduate students: emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, and world assumption dimensions. This study used 1575 graduate students at a southeastern university and Varga found that graduate students primarily seek support from family and friends, unless they are already being treated for mental health issues (Varga, 2015). Students in the study also reported effects emotionally physically, and cognitively. There were not significant differences found in graduate students experiencing a loss in the prior 6 months, 12 months, or 24 months.

Bereavement and Mental Illness

A person experiencing grief is expected by society to get over it and move on with their lives; those who continue to experience grief symptoms after a few months are often looked at as if something is wrong with them (Granek, 2010). Grief and bereavement can become a serious health issue for some people (Prigerson et al., 2008). Bereavement can lead to anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and a diminished sense of self (Prigerson et al., 1997). Graduate students may develop mental health issues relating to bereavement and it will benefit universities to provide services to address those needs.

It is important for universities to understand what other aspects of life, in addition to academics, may be causing an increase in depression, anxiety, and stress. Universities can use this data to develop treatments to address the specific needs of their students (Beiter et al., 2015). Counseling services provided by the university is one way to address needs relating to bereavement and mental illness.

Bereavement and Retention

Bereavement issues at universities and colleges may result in students performing poorly, which affects retention, graduation, and long-term alumni support of colleges and universities (Balk, 2001). If a student is affected by the death of a loved one and does not receive assistance or support from the university, they may withdraw from their academic programs. Bishop (2010) explained that academic failures, socioemotional problems, and other issues resulting in students leaving institutions may also give rise to increased expenditures to recruit students to replace those not retained. Roberts (2016) clarified how imperative it is that universities address overall needs of students enrolled in the university. Counseling centers are one way in which universities and colleges can address the needs of graduate students.

Graduate Students and Interactions With the Counseling Services

Van Brunt (2008) identified three primary reasons why counseling services should be considered important resources for retention efforts made by colleges and universities: students with social and emotional problems have high risks for leaving school; students who engage in counseling have higher rates of retention and/or graduation than those who do not; and counseling offers direct help in addressing various difficulties students experience which could result in them leaving school.

Students with eating disorders, depression, and other mental health disorders turn to university counseling centers as the first place for treatment for mental health at traditional colleges and universities (McAleavey, Lockard, Castonguay, Hayes, & Locke, 2015). One study of colleges and universities found 9% of students experiencing major

depression which is remarkably close to the little over 9% found in the general population (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013).

Accommodations and Bereavement

Students who are experiencing bereavement benefit from accommodations made by faculty. Hedman (2012) studied graduate and undergraduate students (n=123) at a large midwestern university serving nearly 15,000 students, including more than 100 graduate programs. Hedman (2012) found that academic pressures affect bereaved students and that the students may feel reluctant to ask faculty for extensions to deadlines, to take make up exams, or to ask for incomplete grades in courses. Another finding from the study showed more than 70% of faculty were comfortable with referring students to the counseling center and with discussing the death of the students' loved ones. Additionally, the faculty were more likely to provide accommodations to grief-affected students if the death was recent (Hedman, 2012).

Summary

Bereavement can affect an individual in many ways, including cognitively, which may influence academic performance. Colleges and universities would benefit from the development of programs to address the needs of graduate students who are at risk of personal and academic challenges relating to their grief. The studies relating to grief and bereavement tend to focus on undergraduate students with few concentrating on graduate students. I focused on an exploration of graduate students at one online university for this study. Graduate students may experience deaths of peers, parents, or friends during their educational experience, causing them much stress and anxiety. Grief and

bereavement may contribute to the stress and affect graduate students cognitively, emotionally, and physically (Varga, 2015).

This historical literature review included several studies relating to grief and bereavement and college students. Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) concluded the impact of loss relating to death may lead to decreased educational performance, academic probation, academic dismissal, or voluntary withdrawal. Many theories have been used to explain bereavement, including systems theory, the theoretical foundation of this study. Graduate students can benefit from support from the university during bereavement, which may improve retention rates of colleges and universities while addressing the specific needs of the graduate student population. The following chapter discusses research methods including design, population, role of the researcher, and methodology.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of online graduate students who experience bereavement while in graduate school. The focus was on the influence of bereavement on the graduate student experience. Bereavement is defined as a period after the death of a loved one, when family members or friends may experience grief and mourn the loss of the deceased. In some cases, the loss may include cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual/religious experiences, which may become stressful and lead to difficult symptoms (Jones et al., 2018).

The following sections address the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, research setting, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, protection of human subjects, and ethical considerations. A discussion related to the researcher's role includes the use of the primary researcher as the data collection tool and potential biases inherent to this methodology (see Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010; Turner, 2010). Contextual issues of how and where data collection took place, along with documentation of the ethical issues related to protection of the participants are also included.

Research Design and Rationale

The goal of this qualitative study was to understand the individual experiences and perceptions of graduate students experiencing bereavement as well as to provide an understanding of how graduate students perceive the role of the online university as a

venue of resource and support. The following research questions were used as a foundation and served as the starting point for the ensuing interviews:

RQ1: How do graduate students in an online university perceive the effect of bereavement on their academic performance and academic goals?

RQ2: How do graduate students describe the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations for students who are experiencing bereavement?

Qualitative studies examine complex phenomena within their context, a valuable method for health science research to develop theory, evaluate programs, and develop interventions because of its flexibility and rigor (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I chose a qualitative study because this approach provided me an opportunity to rely on human perception and understanding to explore the bereavement experience of graduate students who had lost a loved one during their college journey. My intent was to develop an understanding of how graduate students perceive bereavement as affecting their educational experience. I also aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduate students perceive the role of the university in providing resources and accommodations for students experiencing bereavement. A qualitative study design provides the researcher an opportunity to achieve a rich, complex, in-depth understanding of the social context of this phenomenon (Baškarada, 2014).

One type of qualitative methodology used in social science research is case study research, which provides the researcher with an opportunity to investigate the research problem holistically and provides an opportunity to assist in describing, understanding,

and explaining a phenomenon within the social context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This study was designed for the researcher to collect and analyze data in order to discover compelling answers to the research questions. This researcher's review of the data revealed perceptions of the bereavement experiences. The primary data further assisted me in understanding how such bereavement impacted the students' academic performance and goals. Likewise, the study assisted me in discovering how these students described the role of the university in providing resources and accommodations during their period of bereavement.

Secondarily, I conducted an interview with a professional grief counselor to collect supplementary data about interventions or the role of the university in intervening in the grief process. The data from this interview with a grief counselor supplemented the data collected from the primary participants of the study, the graduate students. In this way, I gained multiple perspectives and in-depth validation of the data (see Carter et al., 2014). I also compared my findings with similar studies in the literature, thus improving the validation process.

There are differing perspectives on case study design. One perspective is that case study is a flexible research design allowing researchers to make changes throughout the research process based on two or three research questions which construct and guide the collection of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Stake (1978) argued that case studies are particularly complementary for naturalistic generalizations based on experiential transformation of implied knowledge into unambiguous knowledge. A case study was deemed appropriate for this study of graduate students' personal perceptions of their

bereavement processes within the context of the ecological system, which in this study was the online university. Primary information was gathered from both the students who were experiencing bereavement as well as from the interview with a grief counselor. I enlisted ten graduate students currently studying within the context of one online university environment in order to gather their perceptions of bereavement experiences they underwent while attending graduate school; I additionally recruited one professional grief counselor as the source of supplemental data.

Yin (2015) developed a six-stage case study process, explaining that case studies can be inductive or deductive and can furthermore be based on both single and multiple cases which can include both quantitative and qualitative data. Yin described that case studies can be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory and work well when “how” and “why” questions are being explored, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with a real-life context. Yin expounded that case studies are not meant to generalize to populations but are more likely to be able to generalize to theories if two or more cases are shown to support the same theory.

Within this research, open-ended questions were asked during interviews with all participants. These questions were exploratory in nature, having an ability to evoke responses culturally relevant and meaningful as well as not cuing the respondents to answer questions in a particular way (Roberts et al., 2014). I used multiple cases and open-ended questions during interviews in this qualitative case study approach to provide insight into the perceptions of graduate students who were experiencing bereavement. I

conducted one additional interview with a professional grief counselor, providing additional insight into the experience of bereavement and possible interventions. The intent was to develop an understanding of how bereavement affects graduate student's academic performances and how they perceive the role of the university in providing resources and supportive services for those graduate students.

Stake (2005) described three different types of case studies: intrinsic case studies, which are undertaken to better understand a particular case, the instrumental case study, which is to provide information on more general issues, and the multiple or collective case, which looks at more cases to find information on general issues. Case study research provides an opportunity to gain insight and understanding of a particular situation (Stake, 2010), such as the topic of this research. Stake described propositions in case studies which place limits on the scope of the study. In this study, one of the assumptions was that graduate students' academic experiences would be impacted by bereavement.

Multiple case studies are useful when studying multiple cases to understand the differences and similarities between the data sets (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Researchers can analyze data both within each situation and across situations, when using multiple case studies (Yin, 2015). The various cases within this study revealed differences and similarities in students' perceptions of how they were supported during bereavement, and how they perceived bereavement impacted their academic performances. In addition, the interview with the professional grief counselor provided further depth and understanding of the research questions (see Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Role of the Researcher

In this study, I served as the instrument collecting data and interviewing the multiple participants and the one grief counselor. Personal grieving experiences included the loss of my brother, my parents, and several close friends, which posed a potential threat to objectivity. My experience facilitating grief support groups and working with the bereaved also posed the possibility of bias regarding expectations from the participants. To mitigate these issues, participants in this study and the professional counselor did not have an ongoing relationship with me. This objectivity eliminated participants' potential propensity to please me with their answers or to disclose personal information unrelated to the interview eliminating any conflict of interest. However, due to the nature of this research, and my own personal narrative, it was possible that the participants, the grief counselor, and I may have shared comparable experiences.

An audio recorder was used to record all interviews. I was a participant-observer, as I identified and interviewed participants who had experienced bereavement while in graduate school. I addressed my biases, as well as potential biases of the participants, related to expectations of past experiences. It was vital for me to be cognizant of the participants' and my biases and worldviews which are naturally present in social research, whether intentional or not (see Fields & Kafai, 2009).

Participant Bias

Participant bias can occur when individuals respond to their interpretation of what they believe are implicit preferences of the researcher, for example, when the participant reacts to what they think the researcher desires (Fusch & Ness, 2015). There is a

phenomenon known as the Hawthorne effect, wherein participants are aware of being observed by the researcher or having their behavior assessed. This can create participant beliefs about researcher expectations, conformity, and social desirability which can lead behavior to change in line with these expectations (McCambridge, Witton, & Elbourne, 2014). I mitigated these biases by assuring all participants and the professional grief counselor that their information would be confidential and interview data would be protected. Furthermore, I conducted all interviews in a judgment-free manner (See Appendices A and B).

Researcher Bias

My method of alleviating my own interviewer bias included the use of reflexivity, defined as “possessing an attitude of attending systematically to the context of my knowledge construction, especially to the possible effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p 7). Moreover, to complete successful and unbiased interviews, I developed a reflexive journal, a type of diary, where I made diligent and methodical entries before, during, and after each interview. Within these accountings, I recorded scheduling or planning decisions I made and cited the intention and the motives for such decisions. I maintained records of the coordination of each interview within the context of my study and records of ongoing reflexivity by keeping a diary which created an audit trail documenting the process and methodology in the study (see Ortlipp, 2008). The reflective diary was used to record such contemplations each time an interview concluded, including that of the professional grief counselor, as soon as possible following the interview. The reflexive diary was used to supplement and

document the entire content of the interview data and to record comments of the encounters, providing transparency in the research process (see Nadin & Cassell, 2006). Furthermore, the reflexive diary served as documentation of the viability of the entire process.

Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007) expressed how in-depth and semi-structured interviews explore the experiences and meanings relating to those experiences. Researchers ask open-ended questions in one-to-one interviews where the interviewer can re-word, re-order, or clarify the questions introduced by the respondent. This researcher asked probing questions and gained a rich and deep understanding of the experiences of graduate students who were experiencing bereavement. Similarly, probing questions were asked of the professional grief counselor. My role was to collect and interpret the data afterward.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) described the prober interviewer as an interviewer who is not content to merely record opinions and attitudes but an interviewer who is trying to get beyond the surface and inquire into deeper layers of the subject's experiential world (p.109). As a prober interviewer, I joined with the participants to build rapport, like a friend. Fontana and Frey (2005) described that a good prober would be able to find an opportunity to ask questions a stranger would not ask. This prober interviewer expressed compassion with the participants as a gateway to gather deep and rich data (see Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, I used member checking and reflexivity to maintain ethical commitments. Member checks are considered acceptable for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative interviews (Neal, Neal, Kornbluh, Mills, & Lawlor, 2015). Member checking is primarily used in qualitative research and is defined as a quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve accuracy, credibility, and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview (Barbour & Schostak, 2005; Harvey, 2015). Member checking is an important part of trustworthiness between interviewer and participants. Member checking provides a chance for self-reflection, enhancement of findings, and a way to shift power from the researcher to the participants (Richards, 2003). I contacted participants and the grief counselor by email and provided them with a transcript of their interviews and asked them to clarify or approve the transcribed information.

Reflexivity is also a useful tool for establishing quality in qualitative research by providing transparent information about the positions and personal values of the research development (Walker, Read, & Priest, 2013). Reflexivity may be the most important tool for the whole of social work practice, since it affects the very trustworthiness of a study (Longhofer, Floersch, & Hartmann, 2017). According to Longhofer et al., reflexivity is our human capacity to consider ourselves in relation to ourselves, as well as our contexts in relation to ourselves (2017). As noted above, a reflective research diary was used to notate contemplations of each interview session as it described the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and observations (Walker et al., 2013).

According to the criterion of quality, before assessing ways in which information was collected and analyzed, I considered what exactly was being studied, and whether the qualitative perspective best fit the research questions and objectives, and whether the research design and development as a whole respond to this methodology (Gómez, 2009). As such, to achieve quality in this research project, I followed the guidelines of proper criteria, process, and documentation of all proposed interviews, as I sought to discover information on graduate students' perceptions during times of bereavement.

Methodology

As noted, the purpose of this qualitative research study, employing a case study design from a population of online graduate students explored the perceptions of those students as they were grieving or experiencing bereavement due to the loss of a loved one. The methodology section includes the sampling, the research setting and the instrumentation. It will further include details regarding data collection and analysis.

Selecting Graduate Student Participants

After receiving approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I contacted potential participants to determine if they were qualified to participate in the study. The criteria, and the sample frame, for participation in this study was that the individual would have experienced the loss of a close friend or family member within the prior 2 years while enrolled in graduate school. Recruitment began once I posted my research study and the criteria for participation in the Walden University research participation pool. Participants were included regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, cultural practices, age, or how their loved one died. Once I received

responses, I used preliminary questions listed in Appendix A to discover if the potential participants had experienced the death of a close friend or family member within the prior 2 years while enrolled in graduate school, a qualification for participation in this study. Since I received the minimum sample of ten participants in a timely manner, it was not necessary to attempt to recruit any more.

The ten interviews were conducted to the point of saturation of data, as no new data was being discovered. In qualitative research, sample size should follow the concept of saturation until the collection of new data does not reveal any new insights into the issue being investigated (see Mason, 2010). The aim of the study can also influence how quickly or slowly saturation is achieved. Charmaz (2006) posited that a small study with modest claims might achieve saturation more quickly than a study aiming to cover complex topics or several fields of study.

In this study, the researcher studied the online graduate student population, who had experienced bereavement, at one university, a modest undertaking, as described by Charmaz (2006). However, it was also understood that if saturation did not occur, with lack of new data, new themes, new coding, this researcher would have continued to recruit additional participants until saturation was reached (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). My objective was to gather information regarding graduate students and their perceptions of how, or if, bereavement impacted their graduate studies. This research was specifically concerned with understanding perceptions of online graduate students who had experienced bereavement in the prior two years while enrolled in school.

Yin (2015) explained that purposeful sampling occurs when participants in a study are selected based on their anticipated contributions of richness and relevance to the study's research questions, and sampling implies a desire to achieve statistical generalizability. Purposeful sampling is used to provide information rich cases for an in-depth study (Patton, 2015). Stake (2010) posited that a case study is what is to be studied and is distinguished from other forms of qualitative research by its analytic focus on one or a small number of bounded cases, which are studied within a specific context. This study sampled students who had experienced bereavement while attending graduate school in the ecological system of the online university.

Individuals interested in participating in this study were instructed to contact the researcher by a secure Internet-based video telephonic system such as Skype to obtain information from preliminary questions listed in Appendix A. After reviewing the prequalifying questions, potential participants were contacted by email to arrange for an individual interview. Students who agreed to participate in the study were contacted to schedule their Internet interview, at which time they were requested to sign a consent form.

As noted, within qualitative research, sample size should follow the concept of saturation until the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue being explored (Mason, 2010). This study sought to understand the perceptions of graduate students at one online university. Due to the limited focus of the topic in relationship to the identified themes of graduate students and bereavement, saturation occurred quickly as, per the literature, new themes likely would not be identified even if

the sample size were to be increased (Fugard & Potts, 2015; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010).

It is important to examine the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the quality of the data, and the study design (Morse, 2016). Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) outlined seven factors which affect the potential size of a sample: (a) the heterogeneity of the population, (b) the number of selection criteria, (c) the extent to which nesting of criteria is needed, (d) groups of special interest which require intensive study, (e) multiple samples within one study, (f) types of data collection methods used, and (g) the budget and resources available (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 84). This study was about a specific heterogenic population of graduate students at one online university. In this study, which utilized ten participants, no special interest group emerged. Furthermore, collection of unmanageable amounts of data may have compromised the ability to identify common themes (Creswell, 2013; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Similarly, increasing the number of participants would not necessarily equate to deeper data being discovered. 'Nesting' in criteria occurs when two or more members of the same sample (the study participants) create a sub-group of the full sample based on a specific condition or measurement; thereafter, this newly created division represents a sub-group of the full sample (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007a). This study used nesting to compare students from various demographics, such as the length of time they have been in their graduate program, what the focus of their studies were, and the nature of their loss.

The seven factors listed above were taken into consideration as I determined that saturation of the data had been achieved (Ritchie et al., 2003). The preliminary interviews established the appropriateness of the potential participants (see Appendix A). The participants received by email an interview guide and questions. Study participants selected for the study were scheduled for an interview and interviewed using a secure Internet based video telephonic system such as Skype. A thank you \$20 VISA gift card was provided to all participants after the study had been completed.

Selecting a Grief Counselor

After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I recruited a grief counselor from the American Counseling Association's website, which has tools to locate and contact specific counselors based on location and specialty. The criteria for a grief counselor to participate in this study was the individual is a licensed professional counselor who has worked with grieving individuals. I contacted potentially qualified individuals by email, discovered via the American Counseling Association. I was able to find a counselor who was qualified to participate in the study as the supplemental source of data. The selected grief counselor received by email both the participant interview guide and questions (Appendices B and D) to become familiar with the nature of the study. The grief counselor selected for the study was scheduled for an interview and interviewed using a secure Internet based video telephonic system such as Skype.

Research Setting

Because of constraints of distance, the interviews with the graduate students and the grief counselor was held using a telephonic Internet-based system, such as Skype.

There were no in-person, face-to-face interviews, and all interviews took place over the Internet (*i.e.*, Skype). As noted in the limitations section of this dissertation, such a research setting could have possibly limited the ability to build rapport with the participants, a factor I attempted to alleviate by sharing my own personal experiences and asking simple probing questions (*i.e.*, How do you feel today? Are you comfortable with this setting?) as a prelude to the formal interview. I informed the participants that they had the option to stop the interview at any time. I took meticulous field notes during each interview session. During data analysis, field notes provide important context to the interpretation of audio-recorded data, as they aid in prompting the researcher of circumstantial or situational factors that may be significant (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, there are four types of data: observation, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell, 2013). I used interviews in this study since the goal is to understand how the graduate students personally perceive bereavement. The researcher maneuvers between various realms while partaking in qualitative research, such as was the case with this proposed study. Two of those realms to consider are the societal and cultural world of the study participants, as well as that of my own perspective (Denzin, 2009). It was, therefore, essential that my interpretations of the results of the interviews actually represented those of the participants and not of the researcher (Holloway, Brown, & Shipway, 2010).

All graduate student interviews consisted of open-ended questions about the bereavement experience to allow for an in-depth discussion about loss and bereavement

while attending graduate school. Participants were informed that they could decline to respond to any questions they were uncomfortable with, and they had the right to terminate or exit the interview at any time during the interview process. In case study designs, the parameters are more explicit than in phenomenological study designs (Bucic, Robinson, & Ramburuth, 2010). As noted, I conducted a supplemental interview with a professional grief counselor to collect additional perspectives on bereavement of graduate students and potential resources for intervention.

These two data sources were sufficient to answer the research questions in this study, which aimed to understand the perceptions of grieving graduate students at one on-line university, and how they described the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations. Utilizing multiple data sources, as well as several data analysis methods, is known as triangulation in qualitative research (Carter et al., 2014; DeVault, 2017). In this way, I was able to discover a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. Triangulation is a vital qualitative strategy which tests validity through the assimilation and exploration of data from two or more unique sources (Carter et al., 2014).

The interview participant question guides were important tools to use when questioning participants. (See Appendices B and C.) The interview guide and questions supported consistency in the interviews and served as instruments linking the research problem, research questions, and pertinent literature (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The questions asked of the participants followed a design as suggested by Brinkmann and

Kvale (2015), who identified seven stages of an interview inquiry: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting.

The interview consisted of a 45- to 60-minute semi-structured meeting. These semi-structured interviews were guided by the established research questions and began with 12 questions (Appendix C), then followed up with questions relating to the answers given. The recordings were coded numerically to protect confidentiality of the participant responses. Because of the emotional content of the subject matter, research participants were provided community grief support resources to mitigate any undue distress caused by the interview (see Appendix E). Participants were also informed of the availability of follow up information regarding the results of the study. All data formats were secured during transport and storage to ensure participant confidentiality. To ensure that the interviews were correctly planned, a field test was performed prior to the actual interviews.

Field Test

I used a small panel of two experts in grief counseling who hold doctoral degrees and who have experience in the work of qualitative research to field test my data collection protocol. This panel of experts received the interview guide and questions to review before participating in an interview consisting of the interview questions in Appendix C. This panel of experts reviewed the interview questions. I was able to determine from their answers if the research questions would be addressed fully and successfully and further that my data collection protocols were appropriate for the study.

Data Collection

I served as the data collection tool as the interviewer, and all interviews were audio recorded. At the end of each interview, I reassured the participant, and the grief counselor, of their rights and expectations for privacy of their information. I answered any questions or concerns that may have arisen during the interviews. Audio recordings were transcribed post-interview and were associated with pertinent field notes. These interviews provided the sources of data for the study. Recording data was stored securely on a cloud-drive specifically password protected, with the password only known to the researcher; the data will furthermore be encrypted, and codes were used in place of names in the study to protect participants' privacy and anonymity.

Since I audio recorded the interviews, both those of the student participants and the grief counselor, the recordings needed to be transcribed accurately prior to data analysis (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I reviewed all audio recordings several times. Each audio interview was transcribed via the electronic transcription application *GotoMeeting*. Participants were sent a copy of the transcription of their interview, a follow-up procedure known as member checking. Member checks occur when the researcher asks participants to review both the data collected by the interviewer and the researcher's interpretation of that interview data. Trust is an important factor in the member checking phase (DeVault, 2017). Participants were allotted ten days to return any modifications to the researcher.

I also maintained field notes to complement recorded and transcribed interviews. Field notes allow the researcher to maintain and comment upon impressions, behaviors,

and other cues, such as voice tone and word choices, which may not be captured through the audio-recording (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I handwrote the field notes in a small notebook simultaneously as each interview takes place. Field notes can provide important context to the interpretation of recorded and transcribed data and can aid in reminding the researcher of situational or personal factors that may be important during data analysis (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Such notes are proposed to be maintained and secured in a similar manner to recordings and transcripts, as they contain sensitive information.

I used an inductive style of inquiry throughout the data collection process. Through inductive data collection, qualitative researchers begin to build patterns, discover categories and themes allowing the researcher to organize the data into assorted classifications of information (Creswell, 2013). This inductive approach began by collecting data that relevant to the topic at hand (bereavement and grief in the context of graduate students at an online university). It was at this stage that this researcher began to look for patterns in the data, working to develop a theory that might explain those patterns. It was at this point that I began the process of data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a dynamic, intuitive, and creative process using inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorizing (Basit, 2003). The goal is to analytically reduce the data by identifying and locating raw data, as well as structuring raw data as follows: indexing themes, indexing content, extracting content, searching for patterns in the data, and integrating patterns in order to address the research questions in this proposed study.

Patterns can be characterized by: similarities, differences, frequencies (they happen often or seldom), sequencing (they happen in a certain order), and correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events) (Ganapathy, 2016).

This was achieved using multiple data analysis tools, namely representation and legitimation. Representation refers to the researcher's ability to extract adequate meaning from the collected data, while legitimation "refers to the trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the inferences made" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b, p. 580). Each participant transcript was initially analyzed following a 3-step process: 1) I reviewed each transcript for how well it describes the experience; 2) I recorded all relevant statements; and 3) I identified and isolated all statements which appeared redundant and possibly overlapped with others.

Hand coding was used, also known as constant comparison analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007), throughout data analysis for identification of common themes. Coding trees work well with open ended qualitative interview questions since the aim is to generate insight and new knowledge from raw, unordered data (Forman, Heisler, Damschroder, Kaselitz, & Kerr, 2017). Coding trees allowed the researcher to explore the data by "looking at each case (e.g., participant, site, etc.) as a whole, and then breaking up and reorganizing the data to examine individual cases systematically and compare and contrast data across cases" (Forman et al., 2017, p. 55). Saldaña (2012) noted that first-time researchers ought to code by hand, as such an approach provides more control over ownership of the work. One straightforward way to think about coding and coding trees is to view them as a system of organizing the data. The researcher

places data in the code just as someone would file something into a physical folder. A systematic way to code the data is to ask what the data is trying to convey, in the anticipated detection of certain themes and sub-themes (Ganapathy, 2016).

Secondly, I used classical content analysis, described by Roller, Mathes, and Eckert (1995), as a technique to discover dominant and recurring patterns within the emergent codes identified previously via the hand-coding process. This process of classical content analysis encompasses the use of information retrieval to complete a "fine-grained" analysis of not only frequent, but also possibly rare responses, as the researcher attempts to answer such questions as: What concepts, represented through codes are discussed most, or least? (Roller et al., 1995). Content analysis allowed the researcher to focus on dominant and potentially minor themes or constructs to deepen the value of the analysis.

Third, I used a keywords-in-context indexing approach, also known as "KWIC" (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Parik, 2000). KWIC is based on three principles: (1) interview transcripts are informative; (2) words extracted from the interview transcripts can be used effectively to guide the researcher to segments of the transcript which contain desired information; and (3) "although the meaning of an individual word viewed in isolation may be ambiguous or too general, the context surrounding the word helps to define and explain its meaning" (Parik, 2000, p. 41). With KWIC, I identified keywords, and chose those words through prior research or theory on the topics of grief and bereavement, (i.e., *a priori*), or seek to discover frequency of use of keywords throughout the data being analyzed (i.e., *a posteriori*).

Finally, I used a technique classified as “word count” which is not simply tallying the words from the transcripts, but rather word count “strategies are based on the assumption that the words people use convey psychological information over and above their literal meaning and independent of their semantic context” (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003, p. 550). The use of word counts assists the researcher in detecting that the participants use words of personal significance and would actually use those specific words more frequently (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Moreover, word counting enabled this researcher to have a method of evaluating or increasing legitimacy. As such, word counting aided the research in improving the rigor of analysis.

Researchers ought to use at least two data sources to be able to triangulate results. Triangulation is a way of improving the rigor of the analysis by assessing the integrity of the inferences drawn from more than one vantage point (Carter et al., 2014). Thus, all methods outlined above will be performed on both student participants and professional grief counselor data sources. These multiple data sources can be further enhanced by using multiple data analysis techniques, such as the proposed hand-coding, classical content analysis, KWIC, and word count, all described in detail above. This rigorous and comprehensive data analysis procedure will allow for a systematic comparison, contrast, assessment, and evaluation of the data across all cases.

Protection of Human Subjects

Every volunteer participant, including the professional grief counselor, were asked to read and agree to the consent forms before participating in the study, including

completing preliminary questions. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study were provided complete disclosure of the research risks and benefits, information on the intent of the research project, and a promise of confidentiality. Further, the personal nature of the research was explained to the participants since they were asked to recall private memories which could result in strong emotional responses. National grief counseling resources were provided to participants, as listed in Appendix G. An additional step which was taken to protect participants was obtaining approval from the Walden University IRB (06-05-18-0381367 IRB approval number) for this study.

Ethical Considerations

This study's difficult and sensitive topic potentially may have caused participants emotional distress or other forms of emotional harm related to their bereavement. I described to the participants specific ways that the study was designed to prevent emotional distress or emotion harm, and further explained that if participants wanted to stop and take a pause during the interview, or if they did not want to continue to participate for any reason, they had the opportunity to end the interview at any time. Participants were informed of professional counselors in their area who specialize in grief and bereavement counseling, as well as information on low- or no-cost counseling, if needed during or after the interview process. National grief resources were listed for participants in Appendix E. I am a trained mental health professional, and there were no concerns about the well-being of the participants. If concerns would have arisen, global and national resources would have been provided, such as *Grief Share* (<https://www.griefshare.org/>).

I followed the recommendations in Section G of the American Counseling Association's code in the treatment of the participants in this study (American Counseling Association, 2005). Section G outlines researcher's ethical obligations to safeguard research participants in the design, construction, implementation, and reporting of research (American Counseling Association, 2005).

The following specific measures were taken to reach this goal. The nature of the research and the scope of the study were clarified, and contact information was provided to participants, and they were given an opportunity ask questions about the study. Privacy and confidentiality were assured during all phases of the research. The graduate student participants and the professional grief counselor were made aware that all information is to be kept confidential and that all audio recordings are to be safeguarded in a password-protected file only available to the researcher.

Summary

In Chapter 3, discussion included an outline of the design of the study, the sample size and participant parameters. This chapter also provided a detailed description of the role of the researcher in the study and introduced interviewing questions and techniques proposed to be used for the study. The ethical considerations and justification for use of a case study qualitative research were communicated in this chapter. This research study may be used to provide additional insight into bereavement and the perception of graduate students relating to that bereavement.

Interviews were conducted with a total of ten master's or doctoral students who had experienced the loss of a loved one in the prior 2 years while enrolled in graduate

school. I considered ethics and maintained ethical obligations to protect the rights of participants throughout the study. Member checking was used to increase credibility to ensure the research represented participants' perceptions of their bereavement experiences. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study and participants were informed of any risks due to the sensitivity of the subject.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe perceptions of online graduate students regarding the impact of bereavement on their academic performance. I further sought to understand online graduate students' perceptions of bereavement support and resources provided from their institution of higher learning.

The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: How do graduate students in an online university perceive the effect of bereavement on their academic performance and academic goals?

RQ2: How do graduate students describe the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations for students who are experiencing bereavement?

The study was conducted with ten graduate students enrolled in an online graduate program at the time of their interview and one professional counselor who works in the area of grief and bereavement. The research was conducted as planned with graduate students found through the Walden Participant Pool. In this chapter, I discuss the research questions, the setting of the study, the demographics of the participants, the data collected during the study, analysis of the data collected, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results of the study.

Setting

I conducted interviews either via the Internet or by phone. My study was posted on the Walden Participation Pool, and students signed up to participate for designated

timeslots. Two of the interviews were conducted on the phone using a digital recording, and the other seven interviews were completed using the GoToMeeting program. The interview with the professional counselor was also completed using the GoToMeeting program. All interviews were audio only.

Demographics

Eight female and two male graduate students took part in the interviews. Participants were majoring in either human services, social work, counseling, theology, or psychology. At the time of interviews, five of the students were enrolled in a master's program, and the other five participants were enrolled in doctoral studies. One of the students enrolled in a master's program in Education since 2016 shared that she lost two loved ones during her program: her ex-mother-in-law and her aunt. This student described that she was very close to her former mother-in-law, who was a support for her children and a particularly good friend. She further expressed that her mother-in-law lived in England, which made the situation much more stressful.

Another student lost her father and uncle back-to-back while working on her Master's Degree in Forensic Psychology. She described how difficult it was to complete her final two courses. Participant 2 described the death of her grandmother while in her doctoral program in Social Work and explained that it was difficult for her because she was very close to her grandmother. Participant 3 was working on her doctoral program in Forensic Psychology when she lost five loved ones within 6 months: three uncles, one brother who passed away due to cancer, and her sister-in-law. She described losing a loved one once a month immediately after beginning her academic program. Participant

4 is working on her doctorate in Human Services and was in the process of getting her prospectus approved at the time of the interview. She had lost three loved ones, including her uncle, an aunt, and her grandfather.

One student lost her boyfriend to suicide during her master's program in counseling. Another participant lost her grandmother and three clients she was very close to during a 3-month period while working toward a Master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. There were two men who took part in the interviews, and one of them lost his grandmother at the beginning of his Master's in Social Work program. The other male lost his aunt and an uncle during his master's program. A summary of participant data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Participant Data.

Participant Number	Degree Seeking	Death(s) Occurred	Effect on Grades
P1	Master's in Education	- Ex mother in law	Down a letter grade
P2	PhD in Social Work -	- Grandmother	Did not affect grades
P3	PhD in Forensic Psychology-	- Uncles (3), - Brother, - Sister in Law	Down a letter grade
P4	PhD in Human and Social Services	- Uncle, - Aunt, - Grandfather	Did not affect grades
P5	Master's in Forensic Psychology	- Father, - Uncle	Down a letter grade
P6	PhD in Educational Psych	- Boyfriend	Did not affect grades
P7	Master's in Social Work	- Grandmother	Did not affect grades
P8	Master's in Theology	- Aunt	Did not affect grades
P9	Master's in Clinical MH Counseling	- Aunt	Did not affect grades

P10	Master's in Clinical MH Counseling	- Grandmother, - Clients (3)	Did not affect grades.
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Note: P1 = Participant Number 1, and so forth.

The professional counselor was a female individual with 12 years of experience as a licensed professional counselor working in the Richmond, Virginia community with students at three local universities. The professional counselor expressed that she had worked with students from different backgrounds who were in various stages of the bereavement process. The professional counselor described working with a 20-year-old student whose boyfriend committed suicide as challenging. The 20-year-old student was having difficulty due to guilt for not recognizing the signs and not doing anything to stop him from taking his life. The counselor shared accounts of three other students under the age of 25 who were grieving the loss of friends who committed suicide. The professional counselor described using narrative work and cognitive behavioral therapy with students to help them through grief and bereavement. The counselor explained that rarely did any male students come to speak with her about grief or bereavement, and the few who did come had already been to a counselor prior to attending college, with the exception of one 22-year-old male whose best friend was killed by his girlfriend.

The counselor has a history of working with Full Circle Grief Center, an organization which provides comprehensive, professional bereavement support for children, adults, and families. Grief groups at Full Circle are attended by individuals from the Richmond, Virginia metropolitan area who are experiencing grief and bereavement. Most of the groups are for children, but once a year, the professional counselor leads a 6-week grief group for adults. The adults are recruited from the

families of children who attend the grief groups, and the professional counselor works to assist bereaved students with coping skills and with normalizing individualized grief experiences.

Data Collection

The participants signed up for open timeslots for the study via the Walden Participation Pool. The participants then received an email containing the procedures for the interview. Participants completed the preliminary questions (Appendix A) to ensure they met the qualifications to take part in this study. An email was sent to each participant with specific information and instructions explaining how to sign into the study. Three professional counselors who work with grief and bereavement were sent emails, and the first counselor who responded was chosen to participate in the study.

I began the semi-structured online interviews with 13 open-ended questions. I posted my study in the Walden Participant Pool on June 6, 2018 and had 17 graduate students sign up for the study in the first 48 hours. Of those initially signing up, seven of them completed the interview. I reposted the timeslots for the study and secured ten students to take part in the study. I completed the first interview on a digital recorder and downloaded the information into a Word document. I completed the remaining interviews using the GoToMeeting program, which both recorded and transcribed the data. The interviews took place from June 2018 through August 2018.

After I transcribed the data, I printed and hand-coded the responses. Some of the computer-generated transcripts did not accurately reflect the recordings, and I listened to the recordings several times, then retranscribed the information by hand. I placed the

recurring themes and topics into an Excel spreadsheet, and the topics were then sorted to see how often each was discussed. Overall, 7 prominent themes were discovered in the ten separate interviews. The interviews ranged in duration from 25 to 70 minutes.

Data Analysis

Participants were assigned a random identifier, from 1 to 10, which allowed them to be classified for tracking purposes without disclosing their personal information. Data were collected following procedures as outlined in Chapter 3. The only added procedure was that the professional counselor was contacted by email, and I followed up with a phone conversation to explain the study.

I placed the themes into an Excel spreadsheet and sorted them to see how frequently each theme was discussed. I organized the data into coding trees to allow me to explore the data by “looking at each case (e.g., participant, site, etc.) as a whole, and then breaking up and reorganizing the data to examine individual cases systematically and compare and contrast data across cases” (Forman et al., 2017, p. 55). After transcription, I noted that certain phrases or themes were mentioned more often than others.

Results

Ten graduate students and one professional counselor took part in semi-structured interviews. I transcribed the responses for each interview question verbatim. I then read each transcription repeatedly to ensure accuracy and clarity and separated each response into data sets to form categories and themes. I extracted meaningful statements or themes from the participants’ responses. I identified the following perceptual themes relating to

research questions: inability or difficulty focusing, the need for an extension, lowered grades, isolation, support from academic advisors, support would be more accommodating from brick/mortar institutions, and the benefit of reaching out to others.

Themes

Theme 1: Inability or difficulty focusing. The major theme or phrase used more often was the inability or difficulty focusing on academics. Seven of the 10 student participants expressed they had difficulty focusing on their studies while experiencing bereavement. The professional counselor described some of the students she had worked with as also reporting they were unable to focus on their studies and coursework while dealing with the death of their loved ones. In contrast, two of the participants expressed their bereavement experience had a positive effect on their ability to focus on their studies. Two participants who described bereavement having a positive effect described that they used their focus and motivation on their studies as a distraction from their grief and bereavement. Two of the participants expressed they have learning disabilities, and the death of their loved one exacerbated their situations. Participant 3 said,

During my bereavement period, my grades went down one letter grade and I got a B in one of my courses. I had racing thoughts and had to go to funeral after funeral. It was very difficult to focus, and I missed a couple of assignments or misunderstood the instructions for those assignments. I had increased anxiety and I suffer from anxiety.

Participant 4 described how her coursework was impacted as follows:

The impact was tremendous on me because I have a learning disability, dyslexia, and anxiety. I was unable to focus and had to take a quarter off after my aunt passed. I had to take two weeks off when my grandfather passed.

When asked in what ways completing her homework was affected, Participant 2 described that

I felt like I lost a very good friend who was an important part of my support system. I had difficulty completing coursework because it was difficult to focus, and I was distracted. There was a two-way positive impact. One was I was able to focus on school work which was helpful with me dealing with my bereavement.

Another positive result was that Participant 2 was a proponent of lifelong learning, stating, "I wanted to do well, as she [her friend] would expect."

One of the participants described she was able to focus more on her studies; Participant 9 explained some positive things which came from the death and bereavement, such as school keeping her busy, which helped her to focus on the goal to graduate. The focus on her studies allowed her to complete school, and the deceased individual's mental illness was draining, so it was also a relief not to have to deal with the mental illness anymore. Participant 8 explained that

There was some impact on my course work, but it was helpful to have school work to do because it kept me busy. It kept me focused. There were some positive changes or results from the death which was I focused on school during the time when we would have been together, and I actually got better grades.

Theme 2: Need for an extension. The professional grief counselor answered the question about the effect of bereavement on graduate students and their ability to complete coursework. The professional grief counselor expressed that some of the students she had worked with worked extremely hard to keep pace with their studies, and if they fell behind, they ended up asking for an extension. This, in the end, created more work later because they had to double their coursework in the following semester to keep apace.

Eight out of 10 participants expressed they felt the need to get an extension to complete their work, although only 7 out of 10 actually asked for and took the extension. The one student who did not get an extension described plans to get the extension but declined the extension and expressed they declined because they did not want to have to have more work the next quarter. The graduate students in this study described they needed an extension on their school work, or they suggested that an extension be granted to other students experiencing bereavement as an accommodation. When asked about how bereavement affected her grades and ability to concentrate, Participant 1 stated:

I called my advisor who suggested EAP counseling and suggested taking a leave of absence. I felt disconnected from my professors and Forensics is not a touchy feeling area, so I felt like the professors did not have any sympathy. I almost felt like a criminal and I was very disconnected at residency. It seemed like my professors did not know what to do and my academic advisor led me to the right place. One of the adjunct professors talked to me like a criminal. My supports were my church and not so much my family. My husband and my therapist were

also very supportive. My advisor did a good job of helping me to take a leave of absence which was very difficult and should be easier. I suggest there are adjustments to studies and students should possibly get an extension. I am not sure, and I don't know what a professor can do. It is time to move on.

Participant 4 described needing more time to complete her work as follows:

I struggled to sleep after my aunt's death, and I had anxiety and panic attacks every 10 to 15 minutes and I had to increase medication. I fell behind in my work because I was caring for my aunt and checking in with her because she had brain cancer. I had two- or three-weeks' worth of late work and I still got a B instead of all As. I shared my information by email and asked for more time. I think it depends on the professor. I would hope they would extend options. I had one rigid professor who was not sympathetic.

Theme 3: Lowered grades. Another theme which emerged was students describing receiving lower grades in the courses while experiencing bereavement. One of the interview questions asked: How has bereavement affect your grades and your ability to complete requirements of your graduate program? Participant 8 described the impact on her grades as follows:

My grades did not suffer. In fact, it made me have more drive to get better grades and I became more involved in the program. My grades got better. I went to Residency for Clinical Psychology, so I was away from home for two weeks which helped me to deal with the death. I did not share that my friend died with the school. I did not know who to share with. Advising seemed like it was

designed for academics, so I did not share with them. I did share with some students that I got close to.

Six graduate students interviewed described their grades as suffering due to their dealing with bereavement after the death of a friend or family member. Participant 5 explained that “my grades went down a letter grade after I took a one-month extension. I just got it done and went from a letter grade of 97 to 84.”

Participant 3 explained that

... during my bereavement period, my grades went down one letter grade and I got a B in one of my courses. I had racing thoughts and had to go to funeral after funeral. It was very difficult to focus, and I missed a couple of assignments or misunderstood the instructions for those assignments. I had increased anxiety and I suffer from anxiety.

The first participant described the impact on her grades as follows:

My grades suffered, and I went down a letter grade. I was very upset when my professor deducted 30 points on an assignment during this time. I emailed my instructors to explain the death and they were overwhelmingly supportive. I felt like I was unfamiliar with what to do in this situation, but I did know some type of counseling should be available.

When the professional counselor was asked how bereavement affected students' grades and their ability to complete the requirements of their graduate program? She responded, “The students I worked with expressed they had to work hard to keep up their

grades after asking for an extension or missing assignments.” The professional counselor described that she had worked with many students going through grief and bereavement.

Theme 4: Isolation. Five out of 10 students mentioned they felt isolated or alone while experiencing bereavement and attending graduate school. Participant 2 described herself as “feeling so alone.” When Participant 3 was asked if she had difficulty completing her coursework, she replied: “I felt so isolated and alone.” When describing how her academics were affected, Participant 1 said: “I felt isolated and guilty.” In contrast, Participant 7 explained that he “... never felt alone because I had my religion and belief in the Lord.”

Themes were identified for the second research question: How do graduate students describe the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations for students who are experiencing bereavement? The identified themes relating to the second research question included support from academic advisors, and support would be more accommodating from brick/mortar institutions, and the benefit of reaching out to others.

Theme 5: Support from academic advisors. The most prevalent theme was that of graduate students experiencing bereavement receiving the best support from their academic advisors at the university. In this study, one of the students expressed that she emailed her instructors who were also overwhelmingly supportive. On the other hand, one of the students interviewed described her professors as cold and distant, and she even quoted one of her professors as telling her that “sorry to hear that, but ...” when she notified him/her of her bereavement. This same student described her professors as not knowing what to do, but her advisor as being extremely helpful. Four students reported

their academic advisors were able to guide them toward the SAP once they spoke with them.

Theme 6: Support would be more accommodating from brick/mortar institutions. Participant 1 posited that there would be more supportive programs and services available at a brick and mortar institution, while adding that she thought staff were supportive at her current university, but she was unsure. Participant 2 explained that if she were attending a brick and mortar institution, she would be face to face with her instructors and other students and they would notice if she was not there, or if she appeared upset or was crying. She further suggested that the students in face to face courses may ask how you are doing. Participant 3 expressed that she thought she would have an opportunity go to the counseling center and talk to someone in person.

Participant 4 described feeling that her attendance would have been impacted at a brick and mortar institution where attendance is part of the grade. She further explained that she did not have to miss coursework because she was able to complete assignments after services and making funeral arrangements. Participant 5 described that she felt her bereavement experience would have been worse at a brick and mortar institution because she would not have been able to spend time with family and travel to the services. On the other hand, Participant 10 reported that she felt like her online experience was quite terrible, as her professors were insensitive to her situation, and they were impersonal, unsympathetic, and unempathetic.

Theme 7: The benefit of reaching out to others. Another theme identified in the interviews was the suggestion from the participants that students going through

bereavement should reach out to others. Five out of 10 students interviewed suggested that students going through bereavement should contact friends, family, and others to talk through their pain. Participant 9 suggested that students ask for help or support immediately and see a counselor right away and further suggested they should rely on their support systems. Participant 10 encouraged students to spend time with their family and advocate for themselves by asking for what they actually need. She further suggested that graduate students take this time get to know themselves better, as well as to discover what they can do and what they cannot do.

Participant 2 suggested that students experiencing bereavement reach out and let people know what they are going through. She further suggested that grief-stricken students should notify the university by calling academic advising or counseling professionals, while also seeking support from peers. Participant 4 sternly suggested that students who are experiencing bereavement keep reaching out to the university because students are paying a lot of money. She suggested that students start an online forum for those experiencing grief and bereavement who might be able to support one another.

The major themes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.
Major Themes.

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
1. Inability or Difficulty Focusing	x		x	x			x			x
2. Need for an Extension	x	x			x		x			x
3. Lowered Grades	x		x	x	x					
4. Isolation	x		x						x	

5. Support from Academic Advisors	x	x		x		
6. Support Would be More Accommodating From Brick/Mortar Institutions	x	x			x	x
7. The Benefit of Reaching out to Others	x	x	x	x		x

Note: P1 = Participant Number 1, and so forth.

Research Questions and Emergent Themes

The research question for this study were:

RQ1. How do graduate students in an online university perceive the effect of bereavement on their academic performance and academic goals?

RQ2. How do graduate students describe the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations for students who are experiencing bereavement?

This section will address the connections between the research questions and the identified themes which emerged during this study.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked how graduate students in an online university perceived the effect of bereavement on their academic performance. The research revealed that participants were affected in many ways including their inability to focus and think clearly, feelings of isolation, changes in their sleeping habits, and their inability to complete coursework and assignments on time during the academic session when the death of their loved one had occurred. These findings are consistent with Balk's (2011) research wherein he discovered that grief and bereavement affect students physically, cognitively, behaviorally, interpersonally, emotionally, and spiritually. Some of the ways which grief and bereavement manifest are the through development of insomnia, difficulty concentrating and studying, and having feelings of isolation (Balk, 2011). Similar effects of grief and bereavement on students were found in various studies (Neimeyer et al., 2008; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Walker et al., 2012).

A sub-theme which emerged was related to graduate students' changes in their sleep habits and their inability to sleep regularly during their grief and bereavement periods. Two of the participants reported having to take anxiety medication in order to sleep, and one participant reported taking sleeping medication to help her through the bereavement period. Furthermore, participant 4 described having anxiety and panic attacks every 15 minutes which left her tired and unable to sleep through the night. The findings in this study were consistent with findings in other studies which describe some physical effects of grief and bereavement, including fatigue, illness, headaches, and insomnia (Pollard, Varga, Wheat, McClam, & Balentyne, 2017).

Research Question 2

The second research question asked how graduate students describe the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations for those who are experiencing bereavement. The graduate students in this study indicated they did not know or were unsure of where to go for resources or aid with requesting accommodations or other services to aid them during their periods of bereavement. When asked what accommodations the university could provide, participant 8 answered,

I think that accommodations should include giving students time off to grieve fully would have been better. The faculty could make themselves available. I would like them to say, 'I'm here if you need me.' I do not know any supportive programs and services.

These perceptions by grieving students of not knowing how to access university bereavement support have been noted in the literature (Boyratz, Horne, Owens, &

Armstrong, 2013; Cupit et al., 2016; Roberts, 2016). Cupit et al. stated that expanding faculty supports, revisiting university practices related to grief and bereavement, as well as religious provisions would assist with advancing sensitivity toward students' distress associated with a death (Cupit et al., 2016).

A sub-theme emerged related to graduate students' perceptions of university support wherein some of the participants, notably 3 out of 10, suggested that the university deploy the use of an online forum or provide access to an online coach specifically related to the grieving graduate student. When asked if there were any personal recommendation for other grieving students, participant 6 used the term "digital coach," aligning with this sub-theme of online assistance for bereavement and grief. The literature has revealed that such a method for grief and bereavement has been studied (Stroebe, Van Der Houwen, & Schut, 2008). There is a growing interest in such a therapeutic intervention. However, the potential benefits of online assistance for the bereaved and grieving student remain outside the scope of this study and need to be explored further (Eisma et al., 2015).

This section addressed the links between the research questions in this study and the identified themes which became apparent during this study. Furthermore, the themes were aligned with other studies in the existing literature.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I adhered to the research and interview protocol approved by the IRB. I maintained a professional role by employing proper record-keeping and reflexivity, using a field journal to record notes, ideas, and associations to help further understand the

phenomenon. Overall quality and trustworthiness were ensured by clearly stating the research questions, using a purposive sampling method, and correctly performing the data analysis. Data were always secured under lock and key during the process and data analysis was correctly performed by using reflective analysis.

Credibility was maintained by presenting a realistic picture of cases in the study and limiting researcher bias. In qualitative research, the researcher is generally the instrument. In this study, I acknowledged that I am a graduate student who has experienced bereavement in a similar circumstance as the participants in this study.

The interview process allowed participants to explain their perceptions in depth. Systematic data collection and analyses were used as I methodically and carefully collected data from the semi-structured interviews. I followed up with open ended questions to encourage participants to provide a thorough picture of their perceptions. I used a digital recording device and the *GoToMeeting* program to capture the interview discussion which were transcribed and later compiled into themes and trends.

Each participant, including the professional counselor was sent a transcript of their interview by email and none of the participants contacted me to change or update their original interview. This method of member checking is used as a quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve accuracy, credibility, and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview (Barbour & Schostak, 2005; Harvey, 2015).

According to Saldaña (2012), transferability refers to the relevance and soundness of the study results. One of the ways I ensured transferability was by using descriptive

language derived from the data. Not all the results would be appropriate to represent other studies, but some of the results may be used in future studies. A paper trail was created and maintained so other researchers could replicate this study.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the processes I used in data collection, data analysis, interview responses, and verification of data. The findings were presented in accordance with the central research questions. The participants recalled, constructed, and articulated their perceptions of their bereavement experiences and their perceptions of how the university could provide resources or accommodations for students experiencing bereavement. The major themes from participant's responses were: an inability or difficulty focusing, the need for an extension, lowered grades, isolation, support from academic advisors, support would be more accommodating from brick/mortar institutions, and the benefit of reaching out to others.

The professional counselor who took part in the study described her experiences with graduate students who had experienced bereavement. She explained more undergraduate students than graduate students come to talk about their bereavement experiences. The professional counselor also noted that mostly women come to discuss their grief and bereavement and students usually come to her to discuss bereavement within the first six months or a year since the death of their loved ones. The professional counselor described working with students from diverse backgrounds with many different types of losses, including friends, family, and losses from both suicides and homicides. The counselor described students who had lost a loved one to suicide or overdose as the

ones who contemplated taking time off from school to heal from their losses. She described working with students within the community who had experienced community and gang violence and had been traumatized from witnessing deaths and attending funerals for their friends and loved ones.

The professional counselor further opined that it appeared as if many of the students who came for counseling were there to see if they could use counseling as an excuse to get an extension on their coursework or as a justification for missing classes. The professional counselor expressed that some of the students appeared to just want to get an extension on their work because they had failing grades before the death, they mentioned and other students shared they came because they were overwhelmed with grief and sadness. The counselor shared that she refers students with serious grief issues to specific community resources, including counselors who specialize in grief and bereavement. She explained that she has led many grief groups in the public schools for middle and high schoolers, but she has not conducted grief groups with college or graduate students. The professional grief counselor expressed that she has found many graduate students are so busy that they do not take the time to grieve, so they most likely would not take time off from their studies to attend grief groups. She further suggested that online grief or bereavement groups might be more convenient for online graduate students due to their busy schedules.

Upcoming in Chapter 5, I present an overview of the study and an interpretation of the findings. I also present implications for social change, recommendations, and a brief conclusion. Chapter 5 will also include an explanation of how the study results can

promote positive social change and recommendations for how findings from this study can advance further research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore perceptions of graduate students experiencing bereavement and their perceptions of how their online university might better support bereaving graduate students. The central research questions which guided this study were as follows: How do graduate students in an online university perceive the effect of bereavement on their academic performance and academic goals? How do graduate students describe the role of the university in providing resources or accommodations for students who are experiencing bereavement?

Ten graduate students who experienced bereavement in the past 2 years participated in this study by answering open-ended interview questions regarding their perceptions of their bereavement experiences and their perceptions of support from the university during their bereavement experience. Participants described their experiences and interactions with the university, as well as sharing suggestions for how they perceived they could have been supported. The themes identified in the study were inability or difficulty focusing, the need for an extension, lowered grades, isolation, support from academic advisors, support would be more accommodating from brick/mortar institutions, and the benefit of reaching out to others.

The professional counselor explained that she has counseled several students at a traditional college during their bereavement experiences. She highlighted that students expressed that they were unable to focus on their studies and reported that they felt overwhelmed with their academic and personal responsibilities. The professional

counselor recalled one student who expressed that she felt isolated and unsupported from other students even though she admitted that she did not share what she was going through with other students or with her professors. The professional counselor shared her recommendations to students that they deliberate carefully before they ask their professors for a grade of “incomplete” because it could result in the graduate student having more work to do the next term which, in turn, might lead to even more stress. In Chapter 5, I present an overview of the study, interpret the findings from Chapter 4, discuss implications for social change, present recommendations for practice and further research, and close the chapter with a brief conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings from the interviews within this provided valuable insights into the perceptions of graduate students of their bereavement experiences and their perceptions of support from the university. The findings are consistent with prior research and reflect the basic principles of EST (see Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Colleges and universities are systems, and students’ bereavement falls within the ecological framework, which may cause a ripple effect, upsetting the entire system (see Bronfenbrenner, 1992). EST explains how overlapping systems of influence impact an individual’s life experiences, both internally and externally (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Graduate students in this study described how their bereavement impacted their performance in their courses and, in many cases, impacted their grades and other aspects of their lives.

Participants in the study described how they felt during their bereavement by highlighting the impact it had on their lives and on their graduate school experience. Examples of these effects on their lives or their system and feelings are described below.

Inability or Difficulty Focusing

Seven graduate students in the study described having difficulty or an inability to focusing on their studies or to focus on anything, as reflected in the statement by Participant 3: “I had racing thoughts . . . and it was hard to focus . . . while going to funerals.” The professional counselor described some of the students whom she counseled for grief and bereavement as having difficulty focusing as well.

Pitman, Rantell, Marston, King, and Osborn (2017) studied individuals struggling to focus while experiencing grief and bereavement. Some of the aspects of grief and bereavement which have a major impact on educational and work performance are tearfulness, anger, poor concentration, and reduced motivation (Pitman et al., 2017). Students in this study reported having to take time off in order to deal with bereavement. The inability or difficulty to focus may impact the student’s performance which, in turn, has an impact on the larger system of the university. Seven students provided detailed accounts of how their bereavement resulted in their not being able to focus in class, which in four cases resulted in them experiencing the probability of taking time off from school or discontinuing their studies altogether.

Need for an Extension

Eight out of 10 of the students in this study expressed they felt a need for an academic extension on their assignments during the semester or quarter in which the

death of their family member occurred. All ten of the students in the study noted they felt a need to ask for an extension, although only 7 of the students actually asked for one. Participant 4 reported that she had to take a quarter off after the death of her aunt and only a few months later had to take 2 weeks off when her grandfather passed away. Three of the graduate students in the study suggested there should be a clear plan for taking an extension.

The professional counselor reported some students were upset because they were behind in their coursework, and they were trying to decide whether to drop a class or to ask for more time or an extension on their work. It would be helpful for the university website to include information on how taking an extension may affect a student's ability to complete the requirements of his or her course or program.

Isolation

Five out of 10 students declared that they felt isolated or alone or expressed feeling they were without understanding of others while experiencing bereavement and attending graduate school. Participant 7 declared that after the suicide of her boyfriend, she did not know who to share the information with or who to tell at school or away from school. The isolation of bereaving graduate students is related to EST and systems theory in general.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) identified parts of the microsystem, including the exosystem, which is the relationship between a social system (where the individual does not have an active role) and the individual's immediate context. In the case of graduate students at an online university, the exosystem would be the social context, which affects

graduate students through their microsystems (see Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bereaved graduate students in an online educational environment may not participate in social activities and social relations, contributing to their isolation or feelings of being alone during their bereavement.

Online graduate students do not have physical access to faculty and administration, a factor which contributes to the stressors of graduate work; several researchers have suggested that doctoral students struggle with isolation, disengagement, anxiety, and depression (Stubb et al., 2011; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). I recommend that graduate students who are bereaving to reach out to their support systems to prevent social isolation and to share feelings and resources.

Support From Academic Advising

Five of 10 graduate students described feeling supported by their academic advisors, who were able to lead them to resources available to them as well as to help them navigate asking for an extension or taking a leave of absence from the university. One participant in the study reported her advisor referred her to the Student Assistance Program (SAP) where she was referred to community resources. Three graduate students who participated in the study reported receiving support from their professors during their bereavement. Two graduate students in the study reported that they did not receive support from family members.

The results of this study show that graduate students are a unique demographic and are considered self-sufficient, which in times of bereavement, or undergoing other stressors, may result in their trying to endure the grieving experience on their own. The

study also revealed that although 7 out of 10 students tried to deal with their bereavement on their own, 6 out of 10 students recommended that students reach out and get support during their bereavement. This study revealed that only half of the students reached out to their advisors, which means many students did not reach out for support from the university. The professional counselor reported that graduate students described that they are more concerned about finalizing their academic assignments to prevent them from losing their academic stability; thus, they hesitate in reaching out to their professors or advisors.

The Need for an Online or Digital Forum

When students in the study were asked for their personal recommendations of how students could be supported by the university, five of 10 graduate students suggested an online forum where students could be supported by peers at the university as well as be able to support each other. Participant 5 suggested a digital coach, and Participant 8 suggested an online support group. Online graduate students are spending a significant amount of time on the Internet, and one way for graduate students to cope with their bereavement experiences is through online forums and social media. Social media is a growing trend and a 21st century coping mechanism for grief and bereavement. Social media allows the bereaved and grieved to post photos, comments, and memorials to their loved ones; the growth of online grief groups has become widespread in recent years and is more accepted and beneficial to those grieving (Kakar & Oberoi, 2016).

The professional counselor expressed that she refers some of the students to grief groups at hospice organizations and other grief and bereavement groups within the

community. She further recalled suggesting students use social media and online blogs to share their stories and to reach out to others who might be grieving as well. She emailed me a list of grief groups and bereavement resources in the community available to individuals at no charge. The professional counselor explained that grief and bereavement can be exceedingly difficult for counselors to address since every grief experience is unique.

Lack of Knowledge About Resources Available

One of the most prevalent answers asked of the participants to what supportive programs and services are available at the university was “I don’t know.” Seven of 10 students described that they were unsure of who to go to for help for bereavement. One of the participants explained that she had received emails about support when there had been mass shootings, but she was unsure of grief or bereavement counseling or policies for students to receive accommodations or changes to help them to navigate their bereavement and successfully complete their studies. There is a 24-hour hotline and support available at the university, but it appears that 7 of 10 students were unclear where they could find the support. This study reveals a need for the university to make the information on the SAP and grief and bereavement support more readily available so students will know how to gain access to the information.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited related to use of semi-structured interviews and a small sample size of ten participants and one professional grief counselor. The case study design, using open ended subjective questions, also caused some limitations including an

inability to generalize the results to the wider population, the potential for researcher's subjective influence (researcher bias), and difficult to replicate (Crowe et al., 2011).

Another limitation was that all interviews were conducted using audio only which prevented me from visibly observing the participants' reactions to the interview questions. Certain elements of an individual's body language, demeanor, facial expression, and the like were undetected by me, a limitation.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study for the identification and selection of potentially information-rich cases for the most efficient use of limited resources (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). However, another limitation was this study's small sample size. Ten students who attend one online university were interviewed, which included nine females and one male student. This study was also limited to English-speaking individuals who were enrolled at an online university and who voluntarily signed up to participate in the study.

Generalizability may provide that the knowledge gained from one qualitative study is representative of the population from which the sample was drawn (Leung, 2015). There is no assurance that this research study could be generalized. Per Finfgeld-Connett, "use of systematic sampling, triangulation and constant comparison, proper audit and documentation" (2010, p. 246) would be necessary components of a generalizable qualitative study. This study did, however, contain proper audit and documentation, considered vital elements of a generalizable qualitative study. Nonetheless, if generalization demands such rigor as cited above by Finfgeld-Connett (2010), this study is not likely to be considered generalizable. Within this study, the

sample of ten online graduate students was presented in depth, another criterion for generalizability as identified by Chenail, Cooper, and Desir (2010). As such, the participants' experiences may represent bereavement experiences of other graduate students.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this study, I specifically addressed the perceptions of graduate students at one online university. The professional counselor interviewed in this study highlighted the fact that many of the students who had significant difficulty with bereavement were those students with disabilities or other life stressors causing their academic experiences to become overwhelming. There are thousands of graduate students who are affected by bereavement each year which highlights the need to conduct larger studies using more expanded populations (Varga, 2015).

Recommendation #1: Violent Death of a Loved One

Burke and Neimeyer (2013) discovered that bereaved individuals whose loss was related to violence including suicide, accident, or homicide suffer greater psychological distress than those bereaved by the loss of a loved who had died of natural causes. These authors also stated that bereavement affects survivors of violent deaths of their loved one by means such as suicide, homicide, or due to drug use. Violent death was consistently found to produce more intense and complicated grief than deaths due to illness (Burke & Neimeyer, 2013). Complicated grief has been noted to occur after any type of death of a loved one but appears more often with death by suicide (Shear et al., 2011). Sveen and Walby (2008) conducted a comprehensive review of studies comparing suicide-bereaved

samples to other bereaved groups and found suicide survivors reported higher levels of rejection, shame, stigma, and blaming. Another study suggested that several factors had been found to increase the possibility of developing complicated grief, including the loss through violent causes of death of the bereaved loved ones (Rozalski, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2017). More research is recommended to follow up on bereavement and complicated grief, particularly as it pertains to graduate students, to expand the existing body of research on violent death and grief and bereavement (Pitman et al., 2017).

Recommendation #2: Diverse Culture and Socioeconomics

The sample of graduate students within this study was at one online university and may not be representative of all grieving graduate students' perceptions. Those perceptions may be influenced by factors including race, ethnicity, religious, or spiritual beliefs, and exposure to death and grief (Gire, 2014). Gire states that there is not a "unitary view of death" (2014, p. 3). Future studies which investigate a more robust population would provide additional research and insight into graduate student grief experiences. Since this study did not distinguish or document race or culture, I recommend larger and culturally diverse studies on bereavement and online graduate students.

Recommendation #3: Long-Term Study

This study reviewed perceptions of graduate students who experienced death of loved one in the prior two years and 50% of the participants reported that they continued to have difficulty focusing and dealing with their losses. Pollard et al. (2017) studied graduate students and their grief experiences and found 60% of the participants reported

the death of a loved one impacted them for more than 36 months. Varga states that 6 to 12 months post-loss is when students display the most prominent grief effects and that prolonged grief symptoms may persist past the 12-month timeframe (2015). Thus, I recommend future studies consider researching the long-term effects of grief and bereavement on graduate students over a long period of time, minimally 36 months.

Implications

After reflecting on the findings of this study, I consider potential implications. Implications are conclusions drawn from the results and explain how the findings may be important for theory, social change, and practice. Below I review the theoretical implications, the implications for social change, and implications for future practice based on the results of this study.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) who stressed how the most central experience can influence the most peripheral one. This means that bereavement or grief may affect how a student is able to function academically and socially. Bronfenbrenner described the *exosystem* is a border environment which directly affects the immediate environment of the individual. This includes the local community, media, and the online environment of the graduate student; the exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem, also known as the interrelations among all layers of a person's overall life-system. The mesosystem is made of specific informal and formal social structures which actually become part of the immediate settings where the person is located and may influence what occurs there

(Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner (1977, 2005 and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) posited that all our experiences are interrelated.

Within this study, the graduate students' *exosystem* is their relationship with their online university (Christensen, 2016). In the case of graduate students at an online university, the exosystem will be the social context, including support systems for grief and bereavement (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Death or grief is part of the *chronosystem* related to consistency or change in the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Positive Social Change

Universities want to educate graduate students, but to assist them in being successful in their academic studies, students' social and personal experiences must be considered. Implications of this single study are clear and are aligned with a large portion of the body of existing research which indicates that grief and bereavement are highly individualistic and specific interventions work best when tailored to a specific individual (Thompson et al., 2011). Outpatient grief counseling would be one way for bereaved graduate students to get individual support.

The goal of this study was two-part: 1) to explore graduate students' perceptions during periods of bereavement and the impact to their academic goals, and 2) to discover how those graduate students described the role of the university in providing necessary resources and accommodations. The findings of this study may be published and shared with universities and counselors to inform practice. Results from this study will provide

universities with information and insight to effect positive social change. Thus, universities and colleges could initiate programs and services benefitting students experiencing bereavement.

This study contributes to social change by adding to the current literature on bereavement and graduate students. This information can be used by clinicians in the development of treatment plans, by university administrations, academic advisors, and professors for seeking or developing resources which support bereaved graduate students. Mental health practitioners and counselors who serve college and graduate students might evaluate the various components addressed in this study to bring about positive social change.

Complicated grief and bereavement are major social issues which need to be addressed. The three levels of social change are similar to the systems in EST. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) classic ecological theory, the microsystem is the cultural blueprint of an ecological system, which includes organizations, as well as social and political context. Bronfenbrenner further explained that the microsystem is related to the student, peers, family, and community (1977). Positive social change will occur when less graduate students experience complicated grief, described as an intense and prolonged yearning for the deceased, which disrupts normal functioning and is present for at least 6 months after the death of the loved one (Bryant et al., 2014; Bryant et al., 2018).

Future Practice

Four out of 10 students in this study reported seeing a therapist or a counselor during their period of bereavement. A therapy for bereavement and grief addresses complicated grief through an intervention called *Complicated Grief Therapy* using similar techniques as those used for depression and PTSD (Shear & Gribbin Bloom, 2017). Balk (2011) explained the need for universities to provide greater resources to support grieving students, however most campuses still lack such programs, an unmet need existing even today (Cousins et al., 2017). I recommend universities discover means of referring their grieving or bereaved students to licensed therapists in their community who have training in working with individuals experiencing grief and bereavement.

Likewise, this study found that 30% of the participants sought assistance and support from their academic advisors during their bereavement. Similarly, a study of grieving graduate students reported that students sought support from academic advisors (Varga, 2015). I would recommend that universities provide academic advisors with professional training and information as to how to assist these grieving students.

Future practice for support of bereaved and grieving students should therefore include referrals for therapy, specifically grief therapy. Additionally, academic advisors, are the most accessible means to discovering support, noted in this study. As such, academic advisors would need training on how to support bereaved students.

Conclusion

Graduate students have many different stressors, including rigorous schedules and demanding academic requirements (Stubb et al., 2011; Wyatt & Oswald, 2013). These students may also be undergoing personal experiences, including bereavement and grief through the loss of a loved one. Graduate students in this study identified difficulty and an inability to focus on their studies, the need to ask for extensions, lowered grades, and isolation as some of the ways bereavement impacted their graduate studies. The professional counselor established that bereaved students she had worked reported having trouble focusing and keeping up with their studies.

Ironically, 30% of the participants in this study described taking time off for bereavement as an additional stressor in their life. Time away from their studies generated concerns for these students regarding academic financial aid and difficulties contacting their peers, advisors, or professors. This time away from their studies was planned to be useful for spending time with family and to attend funeral or memorial services; however, it created more stress and anxiety.

Students in this study communicated that the university should have information on bereavement and grief counseling readily accessible from the university's website. These students preferred a tool such as a drop-down menu on the website rather than them having to contact student support or their academic advisor to find the appropriate resources. To support these study results, students should be advised of the SAP as part of their registration process, as well as be provided contact information for the SAP.

Three of the participants in the study explained they found it easier to access information for community resources rather than those potentially associated with the university. This researcher was able to find the university's SAP and discovered that the resources for bereavement are community-based. Graduate students in this study suggested the university implement an online forum or grief and bereavement group, since these participants attended an online university, making such a tool more useful and accessible.

In addressing the research questions of this study, this researcher discovered that for the sample of online graduate students the general perception was that the period of bereavement was a time of substantial stress. They felt the need to be better supported by the university and more informed about the services which were available. A study such as this one could expand ways of thinking within a wide range of schools, universities, and other institutions to consider the topic of this study. This study reflects a change in 21st century thinking toward institutions being more supportive to their communities.

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Appendix A: Preliminary Participant Interview Questions

1. Are you currently enrolled in an online graduate program?
2. Have you experienced the death of a family member or close friend in the last 2 years while being enrolled in graduate school?
3. Are you willing to participate in a research study on your bereavement experience?

Appendix B: Participant Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about the loss of your loved one. Before we begin, I would like to share with you that I lost my brother during the time when I had just started my master's program and it was very stressful. The loss of my brother led me to spend a significant part of my professional and academic life focusing on issues surrounding death and loss. I understand that your personal stories are special to you and I appreciate your willingness to share those stories with me.

Appendix C: Participant Interview Questions

1. Please provide me with information on your major, your specific program, and what quarter or semester you are in in graduate school.
2. Who in your close circle of friends or family passed away in the last 2 years?
3. In what ways has completing your course work been impacted because of your loss? If you had changes (for better or worse), please provide specific examples.
4. How have your sleeping habits changed since the death of your loved one?
5. How has bereavement affected your grades and your ability to complete requirements of your graduate program? Can you provide specific examples?
6. How did you share with the university or faculty that you were dealing with bereavement? Who did you notify about the death of a loved one at the university? (for example, your professor, or a peer, etc.)
7. Describe your perception of support for graduate students who are experiencing bereavement by the university. What about support from faculty specifically?
8. What are ways you were supported, if any, during your bereavement experience while attending graduate school?
9. What are some ways you would suggest the university provide support during an individual's bereavement? What specific modifications or adjustments to your studies would you recommend that the university could provide during bereavement? What about the faculty?
10. What supportive programs and services at your university are available to you in times of bereavement?
11. How do you think your bereavement experience would have been different if you were attending a university that was not online?
12. What personal recommendations would you provide for other graduate students at an online university who are experiencing bereavement?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share to help me understand how your bereavement experience impacted your graduate studies?

Appendix D: Interview Questions – Grief Counselor Interview

1. Have you worked with online graduate students who experienced bereavement while enrolled in school?
2. In your experience, in what ways has your clients' academic performance changed after the death of their loved one?
3. In your experience, in what ways has bereavement affected students' grades and their ability to complete the requirements of their graduate program?
4. In your experience, in what ways have your clients described support for their bereavement from their university?
5. In your experience, in what ways were your graduate student clients allowed modifications or adjustments from the university during their times of bereavement?
6. In your opinion, how might a bereaved student's experience been different if he/she were attending a 'brick and mortar' university rather than an online university?
7. What professional recommendations would you provide for graduate students at an online university who are experiencing bereavement?
8. What recommendations would you make for the university in order to accommodate the student who is experiencing bereavement? What resources or interventions could be provided?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with bereaving graduate students?

Appendix E: Resources for Grief and Bereavement

1. **Grief Haven** ... email: hope@griefHaven.org ... (310) 459-1789
www.griefhaven.org/ Grief Haven is a non-profit organization providing support and resources to parents and others who have lost a child.

2. **The Moyer Foundation**, National Bereavement Resource Guide
Email: contactinfo@moyerfoundation.org
The Moyer Foundation is an organization that provides comfort, hope and healing to children and families affected by grief and addiction.

3. **Grief.com**
Grief.com is a website providing information about grief, including things to say and things not to say, explanation of the 5 stages of grief, resource information, and contact numbers for additional information related to grief.

4. **Ellies way.org** ... www.elliesway.org/
This is an online site with over 11,000 participants who address thoughts on grief, providing a link to a grief support group, grief poems, as well as a blog.

5. **Resources of Hope** ... www.journey4ward.org/resources-of-hope
This is a non-profit organization providing tips for getting through the journey of grief.

6. **Endurance.org** ... <https://www.endurance.org/>
This website addresses pain and sources of pain, including grief, addiction, and depression.

7. **Grief Share** ... <https://www.griefshare.org/>
Grief share is a grief recovery support group with information on locations around the world. Find a grief share group near you.