

Reorganizing bonds:

A Qualitative Exploration of the Bereavement Experiences of the Adult Only Children Who Lost Their Parent

Zhiqi Yi, MSW & Shuo Xu, PhD, MSW, MD

Presenting author: Zhiqi Yi, PhD Student, MSW
Currently affiliated with the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare

One-Child Policy in China

- The one-child policy was launched in the 1970s and abolished on Dec. 31st, 2015.
- There were approximately 150 million only children in China as reported by China's National Bureau of Statistics in 2005.
- Caring, especially end-of-life caring for aging parents, is an upcoming social issue

What is unique in their parent-child relationship?

- Stronger attachment compared to non-only children (Ruan, 2011).
- Better communication between both ends (Zhu, 2021).
- Prolonged attachment in only children's adulthood (Chen & Wang, 2006).

Research question

How do only children who cared for their terminally ill parents describe their bereavement experiences?

Continuing Bonds Perspective

The connection between the survivor and the deceased is continuing even after the death (Silverman & Nickman, 2014).

Interface

The interfaces between the inner representation of the deceased and the living community.

Dynamic

The construction of the inner representation of the deceased.

➤ Sampling & Data collection

- Participants who are aged 18 and above, experienced non-accidental parental loss from 2018 to 2023, and engaged in end-of-life care for their parents are eligible.
- Sampling method: Convenience sampling and snowballing.
- Resource: Personal social network; Social media.
- Semi-structured interviewing; Member-checking.

➤ Analysis & Ethics

- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).
- Protocol approved by Renmin University; Written informed consent was provided.

➤ Characteristics of the participants

- Eleven were women and four were men, eight cared for their mothers and seven cared for their fathers.
- Ages ranged from 21-43 years old ($M = 30.2$), and the time of interview since bereavement ranged from 3 months to 5 years ($M = 23.27$ months) .

Findings

1. Deconstructing Bonds:



(1) Sense of Loss: loss derived from physical disconnection

(2) Sense of Indebtedness: only children received unreserved love from parents but thought they did not reciprocate back.

(3) Sense of Loneliness: disconnection with the “normal” social world.

I know he loves me and so do I, but we rarely heart-openly talked to each other. Well, it's just that you feel that you have received all the love from your father when you were a child, and all the love has been poured into you, and I feel regretful about what I have done because I did not support and care about him enough as I wanted. I should have learned this earlier so that I could treat him better. (Cai)

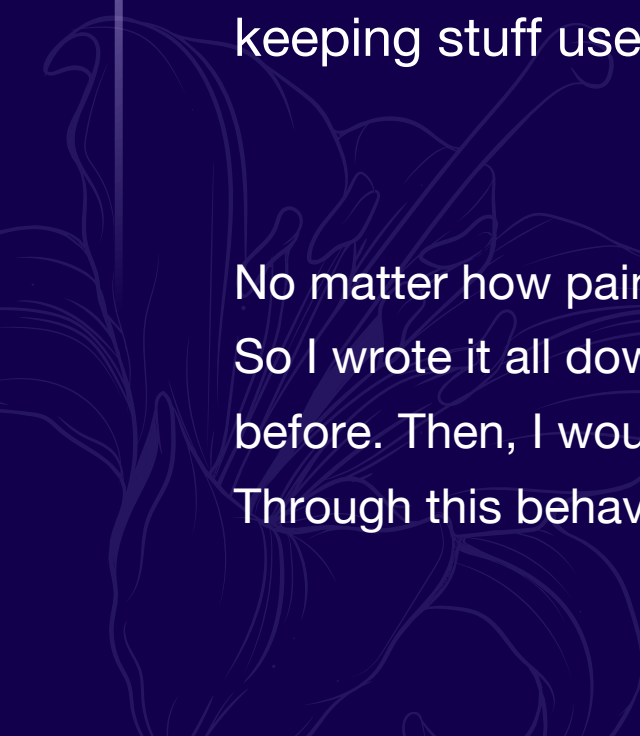
2. Reconstructing Bonds



(1) Finding Spiritual Ways to Connect: folk rituals, religious rites, supernatural things, and interpreting dreams into behaviors.

(2) Finding Ways to Engrave: keep the ash bonds, using online community to record, keeping stuff used by the deceased, writing to engrave.

No matter how painful the experience is, it will bring something positive, and it will be left to time. So I wrote it all down. Then, in the process of recalling, I found that I knew my father better than before. Then, I would post my diaries on Xiaohongshu, and many people could relate to me. Through this behavior, I felt that I could give them some strength. (Jing)



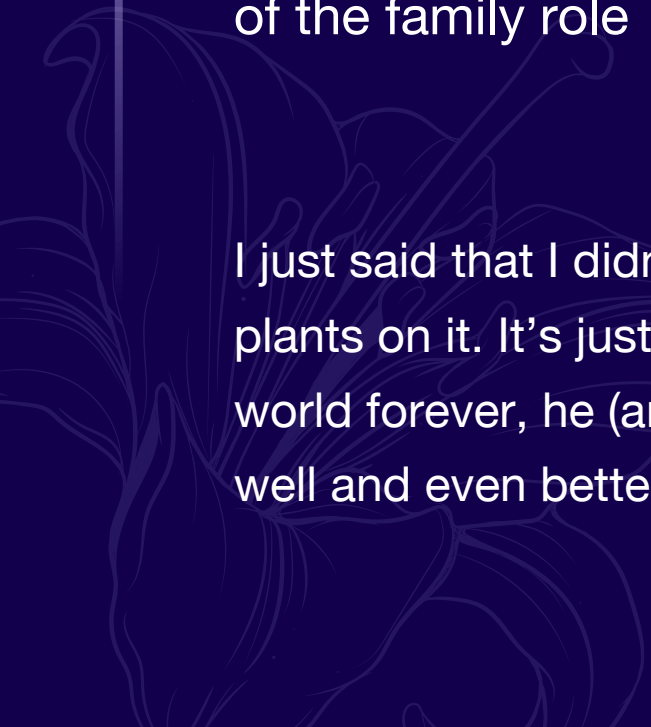
3. Reorganizing Bonds



(1) Internalization: faith in the blessing from the deceased brought peace and spiritual connections, bloodline and habit inheritance.

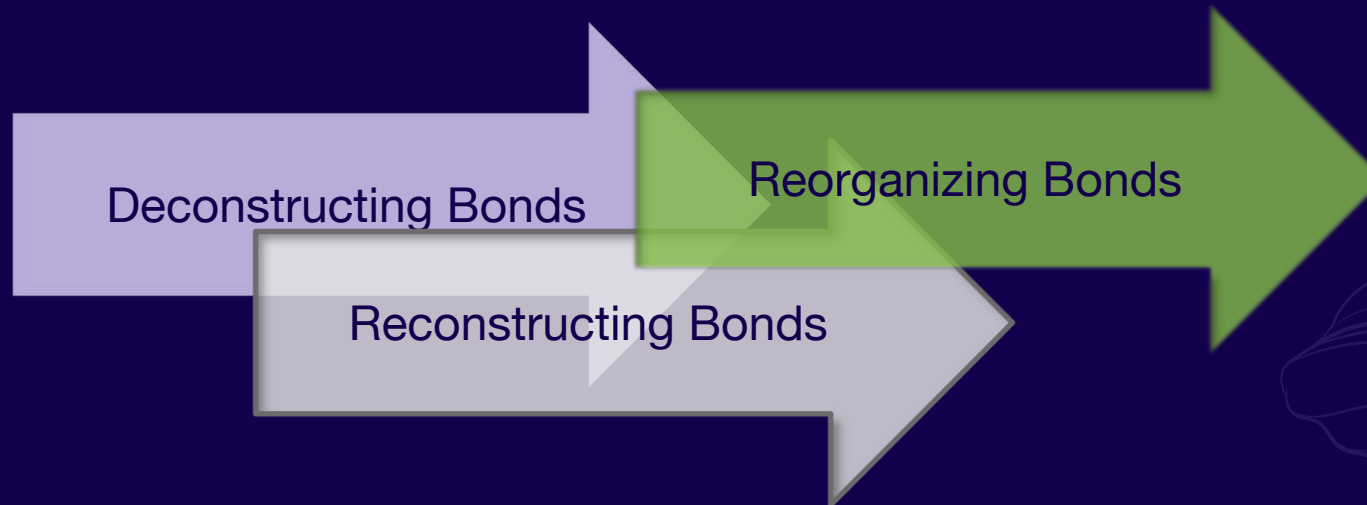
(2) Personal Growth: maturity in ways of thinking, independence in daily life, transition of the family role

I just said that I didn't like to plant flowers on the balcony before, and he used to have some plants on it. It's just that when this person is (dead), and you just literally know that he has left the world forever, he (and his plants) become a spiritual symbol. I felt that I had to raise the flowers well and even better, like some comforts and connections between us. (Ju)



Overlap

The three phases of bonding presented an overlapped essence.

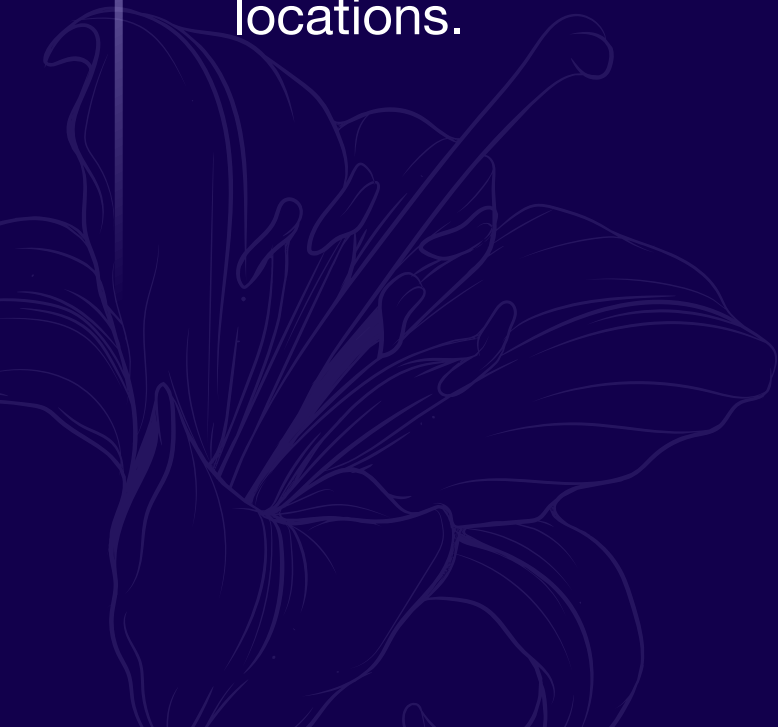


Limitation



(1) Selection bias exists.

(2) Limited transferability to diverse only children and cultural contexts or geographical locations.



Implication



(1) The value of the bond itself during bereavement is highlighted. Theorization around bond-building rather than centralizing disease.

(2) Practitioners can provide psychosocial support and foster supportive communities during bereavement:

- alleviating loneliness and social isolation during the deconstruction phase
- enhancing meaning-making during the reconstruction and reorganization phases
- Phase-sensitive and flexible approaches to respond to the complex overlapped phases.

References

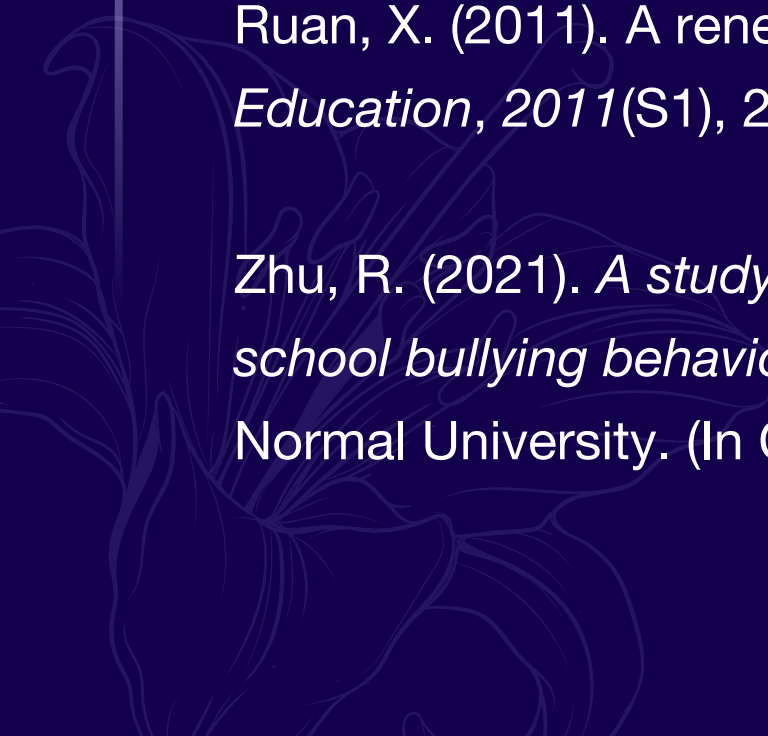


Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). *Thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association.

Chen, Y., & Wang, L. (2006). Parent-child relationships in one-child families. *Shanghai Research on Education*, (12), 57–58. (In Chinese)

Ruan, X. (2011). A renewed understanding of the only child. *China Out-of-School Education*, 2011(S1), 248–249. (In Chinese)

Zhu, R. (2021). *A study on the impact of parent-child attachment relationships on school bullying behavior among middle school students* [Master's thesis]. Shanghai Normal University. (In Chinese)



**Thank
you!**

