

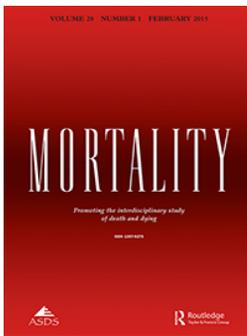
## Research Space

Journal article

**Stability and change the role of keepsakes and family homes in the lives of parentally bereaved young adults in the Netherlands 1**  
**Visser, R. and Parrott, F.**

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## Stability and change: the role of keepsakes and family homes in the lives of parentally bereaved young adults in the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper examines the loss of a parent in young adulthood, showing how this emergent and distinctive life stage shapes Dutch young people's experience of bereavement. Youth material cultures have commonly been analysed in terms of the construction and expression of youth identities, for example, through style, music and leisure. In this research, we highlight three themes in young people's relationship to material culture as part of their everyday lived experience of parental loss: first, the parental home as a space of departure, memory and return, and the potential for conflict, destabilisation and misunderstanding when the remaining parent transforms the home or embarks on a new relationship; second, the different strategies young adults use to commemorate their parent in their own temporary or shared accommodation and online space; and third, the role of small, portable but effective keepsakes and adornment, such as jewellery or tattoos, that meet their need for the emotional experience of closeness with the memory of their parent. A focus on the material trajectories of grief grants insights into how young adults cope with loss in their everyday life, generating understanding of the ways young people may support themselves and be supported by others in the context of parental bereavement.*

**KEYWORDS:** young adulthood; parental bereavement; grief; material culture; parental home; The Netherlands

### Introduction

Exploring the contours of the experience of death and loss in peoples' lives requires an appreciation not only of the nature of the relationship which is severed, but also the biographical stage of the person experiencing the loss; yet, in the social study of death and mourning, this life stage is often taken for granted (Hockey & James, 2003). The death of a parent is always a significant event. Finch and Mason (1993) in their British study show that parents remain important sources of emotional, practical and material support to their 'children' throughout their lives, with obligations expected to flow downwards through the generations, a finding also supported by Swartz's (2009) study of the durability and flexibility of parent–adult–child relations in North America. The thesis of

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continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; White, 1998) implies that in death, the process of integrating the memory of a parent into everyday life is important. In an account which emphasises the loss of his own father, Walter explores how this ‘entails moving on with, as well as without, the deceased’ (Walter, 1996, p. 7). The impact of parental bereavement on children has received important attention, with bereavement research emphasising the unique aspects of grief in childhood that make their experience and support needs distinct from adults (Brewer & Sparkes, 2011; Draper, 2012; Draper & Hancock, 2011; Pfeffer, Karus, Siegel, & Jiang, 2000). However, little is known about whether or how the impact of parental bereavement differs when it takes place in the more ambiguous period between childhood and adulthood.

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the way in which young adults in the Netherlands cope with the loss of a parent in their everyday life, drawing on a material culture approach to loss and separation, to generate grounded insights into ways in which young people may support themselves and be supported by others when they experience parental bereavement. Young adulthood has increasingly been portrayed as an emergent and distinctive life stage in settings such as Europe, North America and Australia (e.g. Beck, 1992; Heath, 2009; Mulder, 2009; Swartz, 2009; Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, Bengston O’Brien, 2011; Valentine, 2003; Waters, Carr, & Kefalas, 2011). This ‘life-stage’ may be recognisable through a pattern of several shared experiences which intersect with class, ethnicity and gender, and other forms of difference that remain significant in shaping and constraining experience. Valentine (2003) summarises some of the processes shaping this life phase:

... economic restructuring and associated institutional changes have produced a transformation in European and North American labour markets ... with the consequence that it has become increasingly difficult for young people to make an early transition to employment. Education and training are now being prolonged, and there has been an expansion in higher education ... , a growth in youth unemployment and an extension in dependency on the family ... (Bynner & Roberts, 1991). As a result youth as a category, which bridges the perceived states of dependent childhood and independent adulthood, is both more sharply defined and extended too. (Valentine, 2003, pp. 40–41)

Trajectories from school to work and from the single status to marriage have been replaced by more diverse and fluid pathways into adulthood where young people are perceived to need to ‘negotiate’ and ‘find their own way’, albeit still being the recipient of parental financial support (Evans & Furlong, 1997; Swartz et al., 2011; Valentine, 2003, pp. 41, 43). Leaving the parental home is a major marker of independence (Mulder, 2009), as is having a sexual relationship (Griffin, 1993; McRobbie, 1991) and finding some form of independent income, but these pathways to adulthood are not necessarily linear and young people frequently move between and mix these states (Jones, 1995; Heath, 2009; Valentine, 2003).

There are new forms of continuing dependencies in the parent-child relationship in young adulthood, which are salient for the experience of parental bereavement. Support networks, notably families, play an important role in young peoples' ability to realise their aspirations and shape their life chances (Allatt, 1997). They have been described as 'safety nets' and 'scaffolds' (Swartz et al., 2011). Similarly, the parental home, despite being represented as a space of departure, is also a place of return and storage, as young people negotiate what are commonly flexible living arrangements of their own, such as student lodgings, house shares or temporary rental accommodations. Therefore, in paying attention to youth as a 'life-stage', we are advocating a processual and performative understanding of age as socially and structurally experienced (Valentine, 2003), and by doing so, seek to better understand the impact of parental bereavement in young people's lives.

Recent research on death, loss and material culture in Europe and America has emphasised the contemporary significance of domestic rituals of memory and mourning (Ash, 1996; Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Kwint, Breward, & Aynsley, 1999; Layne, 2000; Miller & Parrott, 2007, 2009; Parrott, 2010, 2011) and the increasingly diverse and personal relationship to the cremated ashes of the deceased (e.g. Heessels, 2012; Kellaher, Prendergast, & Hockey, 2005). These works highlight the use of objects in memorialising the continuing bond between the dead and the living, and on occasion, attend to the more 'messy' relationships left between the living and material memories (Parrott, 2010). These material culture approaches to loss and separation valuably augment bereavement research which has principally focused on narrative construction and conversations (e.g. Seale, 1998; Valentine, 2008; Walter, 1996). To our knowledge, no research has specifically explored the way in which the shape of young people's lives influences their material trajectories of grief.

Youth material cultures have most commonly been the subject of analyses concerning the construction and expression of youth identities in terms of consumption practices which foreground youth styles, forge subcultures and popular culture in all their global and local complexity (Skelton & Valentine, 1997). In this research, we highlight how young people's relationship to possessions and homes is part of their everyday lived experience of parental bereavement: we explore how young people in the Netherlands explicitly 'use' material culture to deal with their experience of bereavement during this transitional stage of (in)dependence, focusing on how young people maintain the lost parent as part of their network of support; and we show how material culture objectifies the memories, tensions and grief associated with their loss, focusing on their pivotal but ambiguous relationship to the family home. 'Thinking through things' (Henare et al., 2007) helps generate original insights into ways in which young parentally bereaved people may support themselves and may be supported by others.

Great Britain has been the setting for much research into death and memorialisation. Comparable studies on mourning practices in the Netherlands have included a similar concern with the creativity surrounding funeral practices and

the need for Dutch people to invent new ‘traditions’(e.g. Enklaar, 1995; Venbrux, Heessels, & Bolt, 2008; Wouters, 2002), or have highlighted some of the differences in Dutch death culture concerning euthanasia (e.g. Pool, 2000, 2004) and end-of-life care (The, 2004; Van der Geest, 2009). This research contributes to what is known about the way contemporary Dutch people, including young people, grieve in everyday life and how they commemorate their loved ones inside their homes.

### Setting, methods and participants

This study was conducted with young people living in the Netherlands in 2012. Eight young adults who had each lost either their father or mother during their teens or their twenties were recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with two young people known to the author RCV. They were aged 23, bereaved a year earlier, and aged 30, bereaved two years previously, and both of white Dutch origin. Browne (2005) has argued in favour of using one’s own social network to find participants when certain populations are difficult to reach due to the sensitivity of the topic, though it may result in a more homogeneous sample in terms of social distinctions such as class. Beck and Konnert (2007) raise ethical issues in bereavement research concerning timing and methods of recruitment. Overall, we found that this method of recruitment and form of peer-to-peer interviewing generated a high level of trust which was helpful when discussing this personal and painful topic.

Table 1 presents selected characteristics of those participating, ordered from the most recent to the most temporally distant bereavement. Jolien, for example, is a 23-year-old woman whose mother died only eight months prior to the first interview. At the other end of the spectrum is Tess, a 27-year-old woman who lost her mother at the age of 17. Most participants lost their parent due to some form of cancer. In these cases, the participants often saw their parent’s health deteriorate over time. Sometimes the death was unexpected – for example, Sjors’s father died in a car accident. Yet, whether the loss was expected or not, it had major consequences in all their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

Name	Age at Interview	Age bereaved	Who died	Cause of death	Gender
Jolien	23	22	Mother	Cancer	Female
Dorien	30	28	Mother	Cancer	Female
Jan	25	22	Mother	Cancer	Male
Saskia	22	17	Mother	Diabetes	Female
Esther	22	17	Father	Heart failure	Female
Sanne	22	17	Father	Cancer	Female
Sjors	22	17	Father	Car accident	Female
Tess	27	17	Mother	Cancer	Female

The main method of data collection involved repeat in-depth interviews in Dutch with RCV. These consisted of a semi-structured interview followed by a maximum of two unstructured follow-up interviews. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h, with care taken to remind participants they could stop at any time. The process allowed for familiarity and trust to develop, emerging themes to be explored in greater depth and clarifications to be sought, and finally, opportunities to observe the dynamics of situations as they unfolded, including changes to the family home or moving out, annual rituals or alteration in the display of memory objects. All but one interview took place inside the participants' own living spaces, which offered a relatively private and comfortable environment in which to disclose their experiences, and one where some of the material possessions discussed were close at hand. The potential for an interview to be experienced as intrusive in this space was also considered and participants were always given the option to be interviewed elsewhere. Prompts such as 'can you tell me a bit about yourself and your family' were used to guide the initial interview. Participants were encouraged to narrate their experiences, talking through their things and practices. When subsequent interviews took place, most participants brought up new topics or reflections on previous discussions and feelings. Interviews were a dialogical and reflexive process illustrated by comments such as, 'I didn't realise how intertwined my life was with things of my mother', and participation may have impacted on the memorial practices themselves.

Although special keepsakes belonging to participants were photographed during the study with their permission, these have not been reproduced here as some participants went to great lengths in concealing or hiding them from outsiders. Whereas narrating their meaning elaborates the keepsake, reproducing their image for circulation has the potential to impoverish the connection (c.f. Barthes, 1981<sup>2</sup>). Ethics approval was granted by the University of Amsterdam; participants gave written informed consent and all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

The data were transcribed, coded and analysed using a narrative analysis in order to understand 'the ways in which we make sense of the world through stories' (Green & Thorogood, 2011, p. 213). Three key meta-themes are presented in this article, relating to young people's relationship to material culture as part of their everyday lived experience of parental loss: first, the parental home as a space of departure, memory and return, and the parental home as a potential site of conflict and misunderstanding when the remaining parent transforms the home or embarks on a new relationship; second, commemorative strategies young adults use to remember their parent in their own spaces, including temporary, shared accommodation and online display space; and third, the significance of small, portable keepsakes and adornment, such as jewellery or tattoos, that met their need for the emotional experience of closeness with the memory of their parent. Attention was paid to diverging experiences as well as similarities.

### **Young peoples' memories and relationship to their parental home**

At the time of the interviews, Esther, who was now 22, still lived in her family home. She was in the process of buying a house, located fairly nearby, with her boyfriend. This had been a difficult decision as she also did not want to leave her mother living alone. It had been five years since her father died but they had not removed the nameplate at the front door, and little had been moved from her father's 'computer room' upstairs because 'it would always be his house too'.

We [Esther and her mother] find that most of his things belong here. Yes. We can't throw it out. [And you don't really need the space?] No. My mum's computer is here [in the living room]. She uses her computer here... It's a kind of *rommelhoekje* [messy place filled with things]. So no, for me that space doesn't need to be cleared out, actually I enjoy it that it is the same. It is just the way it has always been.

By keeping the nameplate on the door and the computer room as it was, Esther and her mother could imagine the presence of her father in the house and picture him walking through the door again. Due to his job, his absence and returns had always been a significant part of their everyday lives. Esther's mother had created a remembrance display on a side table in the living room, but besides that, the interior had barely changed.

Talking with Esther drew attention to the importance of the family home as a nostalgic place for remembering in relation to her family dynamics. Esther revealed that she was reluctant to discuss her father's death with her mother. In later interviews, she said that sometimes she wanted to talk about her father but her mother would feel depressed for the rest of the day. The house, as a site of memory, connects Esther and her mother. It is not only a way to sustain their relationship with their father, but may also be a way to sustain and share their grief with each other. Esther described herself as 'Papa's little girl'. She said that her relationship with her mother had improved after her father died, because 'they had to make it work' between the two of them.

Jolien was 23 years old and her mother had died less than a year ago. In trying to describe her feelings towards her parental home, she contrasted it with the graveyard where her mother was buried. Jolien argued:

So many people lie there, and my mother never came there when she was alive. It is merely the body and the stone that is there. Here [in the house] she is alive. There [the graveyard] she is dead and that place is connected to death.

Jolien lives in an apartment above her parental home. She has drawn comfort from this feeling of proximity to her 'mother' but is thinking about moving. She feels that living so close stands in the way of her gaining independence. The death of her mother has encouraged Jolien to reflect deeply on what she sees as her dependence on her mother. Being the youngest child her mother

enjoyed having her at home: 'We could have arguments ... But in the end she wanted me to be that sweet little child that would stay home forever'.

Both Esther and Jolien can return to their family homes and childhood memories, surrounding themselves with the presence of their lost *and* living parents. Each of them has experienced greater ties to their parental home by virtue of their loss and their concern for their other parent. Despite the maturity they feel they may have gained by seeking to care for their remaining parent or having to cope with the loss of a parent they depended upon, it is leaving home that is the socially recognised and embodied marker of independence. The process of leaving home, whether to cement a relationship or to pursue greater independence, is not easy, even when the home remains a stable core. When parentally bereaved, the trials and tribulations of transforming their relationship with their family home and dependence on parents may be played out as much through the material and emotional presence of the deceased parent as with the living.

Turning to the cases of other young adults provides insights into what happens when the remaining parent begins living together with a new partner. Shortly after her mother died, Saskia's father had begun a new relationship. Saskia's father asked her many times to sort out the belongings of her mother; yet, she kept postponing. When her father remarried, the photos and belongings had to be removed. A closet filled with her mother's jewellery and clothes was especially important to Saskia, as she liked to open it and be surrounded by her mother's smell. Three years after her mother's death, Saskia sorted the closet, disposed of certain things, gave others to family and friends and relocated many of the objects to her own place to create a memory space there:

In the beginning it was still too fresh and I couldn't deal with it [the sorting out of things]...One time I just put on some music and then it went all right. It is not that you get over it [the loss] but you go through a barrier and then it is easier to let go of stuff.

Tess was 17 when her mother died and 10 years had passed since the bereavement. Still, the death of her mother played a big part in her life. Shortly after Tess's mother had passed away, her father also remarried. He had rigorously refurbished the house to Tess's disgust. Tess felt her father had not included her or her sister in this process, and she hated that when she visited 'it did not feel like "home" anymore'. She would fall back on imagining the family home as it used to be, as what she felt was the real home had disappeared.

These experiences show the tension between the reality of the parental home and the memories and ideals young adults have of their parental home. One important element in coming to terms with change appears to be the control one has over the divestment, or the degree of negotiation and mutual understanding shared within the family. Saskia was able to sort some things out herself and select items to move to her own place. For Tess, the refurbishment was one of several events where the discrepancy between the ways Tess wished

to commemorate her mother and the way her father desired became achingly clear. At best, young adults are able to select and reposition memories from the parental home to their own home or find other ways of securely responding, which allow both a retaining of the dead and a moving on (c.f. Walter, 1996). At worst, it adds to the feeling of loss and loneliness as transformations in the parental home and in parental relationships occur. The material changes reveal tensions in family relations and sometimes painfully remind these young adults what they are missing and what they have lost. Neither Tess nor Saskia lived in their parental home. It held great significance to them at this point in their lives, yet was not 'theirs' to live with every day as it was for their other parent.

For some young people, the new relationship of their parent brought relief. Jan was 22 when he postponed leaving home after his mother died. In his family, his mother had been the key decision-maker and Jan took on this role after her death. Jan thought that his family would 'fall apart' if he did not take on this role, and only after his father remarried did Jan feel able to leave home. The new partner also took on the task of sorting out the house, room by room, to the relief of Jan, his father and brothers.

Whereas most of the clutter in the house had become a burden, Jan described one object as the *rode draad* (red thread) or a constant in his life: the jukebox. This single possession, which had survived through multiple childhood moves made the house the home in the same way that other young people cherished aspects of their home or the whole house. During the study period, it was the source of a fight with his father who suggested selling it. Jan said he would take it himself but he did not have room in his own shared house. By the end of the study, it had not been sold.

Every young adult in this study aspired to leave or had moved out of their parental home. As Jan's story illustrates, young adults think about the things they would like to take from their parental home into their own living space. However, young adults rarely took large items with them such as a piece of furniture, which they may have done were they at a stage where they had settled in a more permanent home. These young adults moved frequently or were uncertain of the duration they would stay in one house, tended to live compactly and sometimes shared their space with other young people. This shaped the ways in which they remembered or memorialised their parents in their own living space.

### **Young peoples' spaces and memorial strategies**

In their own living spaces, these parentally bereaved young adults had greater freedom to shape, modify or create material memory. Tess has a '*kistje vol sentimenten*' (box filled with memories) stored in her closet and a side table in the living room filled with small items connected with her mother. The items presented are a combination of old and new, from small china ornaments, key chains, make-up and postcards that belonged to her mother, to new purchases that stirred old memories. The items move between the box and the table.

When she rearranges the display, she refreshes her memories attached to her mother and consciously reflects on and handles the objects. Tess is very afraid of ‘losing’ memories of her mother – it has been 10 years since her death – and is determined to hold on to as many objects as possible. Rearranging as a strategy privileges the process over presentation, a process through which the person can show their continued care for the memory of their loved one (Garvey, 2001; Parrott, 2011).

Objects were also used to create a narrative of the past. Jolien has covered her house with photographs of her mother, together with Jolien and her siblings; they show different points in their childhoods and teens and significant events, including the last holiday they took as a family. Jolien has always enjoyed surrounding herself with pictures, and after her mother’s death, she sorted out her favourite photos. However, she sometimes finds it too confronting to see her mother’s photos and then she turns the photos so she cannot see the faces, which she explains helps her ‘pretend that “it” did not happen’.

The images sequence her childhood and depict the relationship she had with her mother, father and siblings. Sometimes, the power of that biographical presentation confronts her with what she is missing, and perhaps even more significantly projects what will never come. When that happens she turns the frames, an act which articulates the complications of this closeness (See Rose, 2005, p. 231). She also creates new connections through the aesthetics of style and resemblance through photographs: she has recreated a picture, portraying her mother in her 20s, but instead, she herself is the object of the picture. She enjoys the physical resemblance and sees this as a confirmation that her mother will always be a ‘part’ of her.

Divestment is also a significant strategy through which these young people respond to their loss within their own living environment. Here, young people have control over the pace at which they divest themselves of some things and privilege others. Through the reduction of commemorating things to one or a small number of objects, these selected things can then stand for the remembrance, or in the participants’ words, help to find the ‘*essentie*’ (essence) of a person (see also Barthes, 1981; Miller & Parrott, 2009, p. 509). For example, Dorien, a 30-year-old woman who lost her mother two years previously, moved house between the first and the follow-up interview. After the first interview, she realised that she had many things that were connected to her mother, most of them practical everyday objects such as clothes and cutlery. Prompted by the move (and perhaps our interview), she decided that it was time to part with certain things, prioritising others which could metonymically stand for the memory of her mother. Alternatively, for Jan, the process of finding something in which he could locate the ‘essence’ of his mother was arrived at through an entirely new object: a painting that he wished to commission portraying him and his mother. He argued that he did not find it necessary to keep things from the past – with the exception of the jukebox – but that this painting would help capture the relationship that he had with his mother.

The examples described are all dynamic ways in which these young adults negotiated the absence of their parent in their own living space. Different strategies have different effects – for example, certain more ephemeral re-ordering practices can keep memories fresh (c.f. Garvey, 2001), other objects form part of a presentational narrative or create solidarity through resemblance in photographs (See Parrott, 2010), others involve the process of gradual divestment (See also Miller & Parrott, 2009), while still others involve remembering through new rituals of consumption (Layne, 2000; Parrott, 2011).

Although young people have the opportunity to express the ways in which they want to remember their parent inside their own homes, presentation is nevertheless constrained. In the context of shared living arrangements, for example, display and accumulation may need to be considered appropriate by their housemates. Saskia lived in a flat with a friend and she did not want the space in the living room to look like a ‘shrine’ for her deceased mother, either in front of her housemate or visiting friends. Therefore, she kept her larger keepsakes, including a sizeable photograph, in her bedroom, displaying smaller things on a shelf of the living room cupboard. As curators of their own presentational spaces, they took into account the perceived responses of peers, as well as their own preference to keep certain things private, moderating what, how many and where mementos were displayed. In the spaces where others entered, the photos and objects were commonly inconspicuous and very small.

Young adults conducted themselves with a similar degree of attention to how their remembrances might be perceived in their online ‘display’ spaces. Occasionally, some of these young adults used social media such as Facebook as a medium for remembrance. On birth or death days, they would post a song, poem or short message like ‘I miss you’ for their deceased parent. As extended social space, it may have felt wrong to have had no comment or sign pertaining to these significant days, as if they were denying their parental memory. However, they were ambivalent about this medium: they wanted to show some people that they had lost a parent and were thinking about them, yet they did not appreciate it when less-acquainted people in their social network posted comments on their wall asking them what was wrong. As a result, their remembrance notifications, like their discretely displayed things, were usually phrased in such a way as to be made sense of and intended for a small group, albeit their visibility to their wider online social network.

Peer groups are very important in the development of young adults’ sense of identity, in which they are expected to work on their ‘individuality’ and simultaneously conform to peer ‘norms’ (Valentine, 2003). It is noteworthy that just as they curated their material displays, these young adults described moderating their talk about their loss with their peers with the exception of certain friends who had known their parent well or suffered a similar loss.

### **Keeping memory 'close'**

The transition to young adulthood was characterised by these participants by moving: moving out of the parental home and towards independence. Yet, after moving out, their new home is seldom permanent and they may move many times into new house shares, relationships or for work or further education. The spaces that they inhabit may be small and shared. This affects the way these young adults commemorate their parents and the objects that they use to do so. Some of the most successful keepsakes which kept their lost parent near were therefore those that were small and portable, but beyond this, they were types of things or adornments that could be kept physically close.

Among the participating young women, the most frequent and important keepsake of this kind was jewellery. Two of the young women wore their father's wedding ring permanently in a necklace around their neck. Others saved the wearing of jewellery as memento for a special occasion such as a birthday. When worn, these keepsakes achieved the constant feeling of closeness to the deceased parent that most of these young adults desired. This quality could also be found in a permanent memento: a tattoo. Three of the participants had a tattoo in remembrance of their deceased parent; Esther even had the ashes of her father mixed with the ink of the tattoo so that she literally carried her father around wherever she went. For Jolien, it was equally important to have a permanent and visible link with her deceased mother. She put a lot of thought into the symbolism in the tattoo: the tattoo represents the initials of her mother and are in her mother's handwriting; the letters are adorned with a wave shape, as her mother used to love the sea. She enjoys the idea that only 'insiders' know the symbolism of the wave, while for others, it is just decoration. Sometimes she talks to her mother while touching the tattoo and by doing so, she feels connected to her mother. The tattoos create a permanent link between the young adults and their deceased parent and therefore, they will never have to part with them completely.

As both jewellery and tattoos are forms of adornment, they move in and out of different spaces with the body. In other words, these keepsakes form part of the 'social skin' in interactions with others (Gell, 1993). This characteristic evoked ambiguous emotions. On the one hand, having this embodied nearness to their parental memory was desirable. On the other hand, it was undesirable, as others could comment on the memento. Jolien had an unpleasant experience at her new job when a colleague spotted her tattoo. She was caught off guard and found the topic too heavy to discuss with her new colleague in depth. She had not discussed her mother's death at her new job and she had wished to disclose it on her own terms.

Young people also use other forms of material and sensory envelopment in memory. An example of this is sound and immersion in memory through music. In some cases, the voice of the parent was recorded and in other cases, the parent was watched moving and speaking or laughing in home videos. Music is a powerful medium to evoke emotions and it was often perceived as a

source of heightened feeling. Many participants noted that they used music to trigger emotions, for example, when they wanted to cry ‘but the tears would not come’. Hearing the music which had been played at the funeral or music of the taste of their parent was very effective in doing this. However, when certain music was too heavily associated with one interior in particular, such 22-year-old Sjors’s father’s routine of listening to Pink Floyd every Saturday morning in the family living room, it could feel strange and out of place listened to elsewhere.

To some extent, the need for things which successfully gave these young people the feeling of closeness to their parent, sometimes a feeling they desired to have continuously, is well established in research on death and material culture (e.g. Ash, 1996; Kwint et al., 1999). However, the homogeneity with which these young people sought this emotional experience of nearness was significant. Importantly, it complicates understandings of this life stage and leaving the parental home as a simple desire for separation from parents. Research suggests that despite wanting to become independent, young people still need their families’ support to feel secure as they seek to navigate that independence (Allatt, 1997; Swartz et al., 2011). For these parentally bereaved young adults who have experienced such a rupture to their nuclear family relationships, this may translate into a desire for closeness to the memory of their parent that coexists with a desire for independence, greater mobility and separation from the day-to-day life lived at home.

### **Discussion: ‘is it normal that I am still crying ... ?’**

This paper examined experiences of parental bereavement in young adulthood among a group of white Dutch middle class women and men, exploring how this emergent and distinctive life stage shaped their experience and responses to their loss. The study foregrounded the material aspects of young peoples’ responses, developing recent research into death, mourning and material practice. Diversity and personal creativity is evidenced in contemporary mourning rituals (e.g. Kellaher et al., 2005; Miller & Parrott, 2009; see also Walter, 1994 on the ‘individualising of loss’). Our findings also suggest that certain themes emerge when exploring the experiences of specific social groups in particular life stages (Draper, 2012; Hockey & James, 2003). We showed the variety of highly personal ways young people in this study chose to remember their parent who had died. Yet, we also found that their connections to things and homes in bereavement were socially and structurally shaped by the nature of contemporary non-linear pathways into adulthood, in which continuing (financial and emotional) dependencies on parents jostle with normative markers of independence, such as leaving parental homes, having sexual relationships and finding some independent income.

The young adults in this study, on the one hand, drew on commemorative practices to cope with parental bereavement during this time of transition. They

commemorated their lost parent using adornments (e.g. tattoos incorporating the ashes and jewellery) in ways that kept the memory of their parent emotionally and physically close; they curated memory objects and displays in their living spaces and online, although this was constrained by the temporary nature of their living arrangements and moderated by the need to appear like any other 'normal' young adult among their housemates, peers and online social networks. On the other hand, they experienced tensioned, conflicting and ambivalent relationships with family possessions and the parental home, whether they sought greater independence from the family home and remaining parent with which/whom they experienced strong ties following the bereavement, or whether they desired to be able to nostalgically return to the security of memory and the comforting presence of their dead parent in the family home after moving out. This phase is often seen as a time of self-exploration in industrial societies, but it is also characterised by the need for advice and support. Often the person they most want to be able to turn to is the person that they have lost.

These young adults asked the interviewer RCV, 'is what I'm doing normal?' The issue of passing time was often mentioned with statements like 'it has been two years' or 'it has been five years... so therefore I should be 'over' it'. Their concerns resonate with Walter's (1996) practical assertion that 'the bereaved should be reassured that they may retain the deceased ... If there has to be both a retaining and a moving on, it is the retaining of the dead that in our [modern Western] culture needs to be affirmed' (1996, p. 23). While we would not propose any one model, attention to the material trajectories of grief may usefully inform relational understanding of grief processes in bereavement research. Professionals and pastoral carers may be able to help the bereaved identify remembrance strategies that work for them and be able to listen and make sense of the complexity of the social and material dynamics of grief.

One of the key areas this study identified concerned the role of the parental home as a site of memory for young people. The case examples presented in this paper demonstrated, in diverse ways, the potential for tension between the expectations of young adult children and parents over the 'right' way to grieve and commemorate. In particular, discrepancy in intergenerational expectations of remembering and coming to terms with the loss focused around the parental home. We showed how parental bereavement may focus the feelings young adult children had towards certain objects or spaces in the house in different ways and how conflicts over divestment, when unresolved, could compound young peoples' feelings of loss and loneliness. For others, the parental home became a space in which children and their living parent shared their grief at the loss together. Here, there was potential for young adult children to struggle with their desire for independence. It is possible that families who can make sense of events, whether through shared commemorative practices or through recognising their different experiences of loss and connection, may be more 'resilient' to the effects of bereavement as a traumatic event in the long term (See Rendall & Stuart, 2012).

Although this study provided in-depth insights into the material trajectories of grief among a small group of young Dutch adults, it was limited in its scope and by the method of recruitment. Though the participants did not form a coherent collective (no more than any two of the participants knew one another), the sample was ethnically and socio-economically homogeneous. It is likely that the life trajectories of young Dutch adults of different social classes may follow different patterns (Guiaux, Roest, & Iedema, 2011) or, for example, that young adults in Turkish and Moroccan families – the two largest immigrant groups – in the Netherlands may have different ways of relating to parental and future homes, particularly among young women (Hooghiemstra, 1997). The ramifications for parental bereavement and remembrance practices may likewise be expected to be different and merit further consideration.

The ‘Dutch’ experience of these participants with respect to this socially and economically defined life stage may perhaps be less significant than the cross-cutting nature of shared patterns of work destandardisation, growth in higher education, extended parental dependency and diversification of routes into partnership and parenthood (Valentine, 2003). In this respect, these young Dutch adults had much in common with other young middle class people from Britain, Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand (Parrott, 2010, 2011). Had we investigated other aspects of parental illness and bereavement, we might have expected comparative differences to emerge, specifically around young adults’ involvement in planning for end-of-life care, as three out of the eight participants’ parents had elected to use euthanasia. This topic deserves further investigation, but it did not appear to alter young peoples’ memorial practices in this group in any clear way.

The analysis of memorial practices and responses to loss among the young people described in this paper, as individuals within families and peer groups, furthers understanding of the particularities of parental bereavement, and highlights the need for processual understandings of the effect of age and experience on grief and responses to death.

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## **Notes**

- [1] It has been suggested that people engage in forms of anticipatory mourning when loss is expected, for instance, in terminal illness (e.g. Seale, 1998), that impacts on adjustment after the death; however, we did not find the longer term experience of bereavement and loss to differ by cause of death in this small group. This would require further investigation, but one possibility based on our research and personal experience may be that younger people faced with the loss of their parent and the people surrounding them try explicitly to avoid engaging in anticipatory mourning.

- [2] In *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography* (1981), Roland Barthes describes but never reproduces the photograph of his deceased mother in his text.

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