



**“WE ARE IN THE BATTLEFIELD”: "BEREAVED MOTHERS AND WIDOWS:
NAVIGATING MULTIGENERATIONAL CONFLICTS.**

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ABSTRACT

Background: Although the loss of a close family member affects the family relationship, most studies have focused on the coping of individuals with the loss and only a minority have examined the family system and the mutual influence of family members on their adjustment to loss. Less is known about the intergenerational relations in the context of loss. The aim of this article is to discuss conflicts in the relationships between Israeli widows and bereaved mothers after the death of their husband and son. Methods: Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with two groups of participants: ten bereaved mothers and ten widows (from different bereaved families) whose sons or spouses died while serving in the Israeli military, the police, or the security forces. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results: The following conflictual issues were identified: (1) Fighting over the memory of the deceased; (2) Tensions around the relationship with the children/grandchildren; and (3) Offensive communication patterns. Discussion: These conflicts are discussed in the Israeli context. The grieving rituals and the honor bestowed upon soldiers and other members of the security forces and their families have paradoxically served to silence the issue. At the same time, the findings and the literature suggest an urgent need for professional intervention to help the families avoid disconnection, aggression and even violence in those vulnerable relationships and maintain them after the loss.

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Introduction

This article is part of a larger qualitative study that explores the perception of the relationships between Israeli widows and bereaved mothers following the loss of their son or husband (Segev et al., 2020). It focuses on multigenerational conflict, aggression, and violence in bereaved families as perceived by Israeli widows and bereaved mothers. Intergenerational relations are highly important for coping with loss. Given the significant but potentially different effects of bereavement on bereaved mothers and on widows, it is important to examine their post-loss relationships, and particularly their coping with conflicts, within the Israeli cultural context of military grief.

Feminist theories claim that women tend to exhibit feminine solidarity. This claim has led to the assumption that relations between female family members tend to lack conflict, aggression or violence. It is also commonly assumed that women tend to show concern, caring and nurturing in their relationships, while much less is known about power relations between women in the family (Gilligan, 1982).

Of all the in-law dyads, the mother in-law (MIL)-daughter in-law (DIL) relationship is the most frequently studied, based on the assumption that it is the most turbulent (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009), and has a great potential for conflict because of often-conflicting developmental tasks. Therefore, most family researchers address the problems, complexity, and ambivalence

surrounding the DIL's relationship with her MIL (Adhikari, 2015; Turner et al., 2006).

Bereavement is a "family affair" (Stroebe & Schut, Department of Clinical Psychology, Utrecht University, 3508 TC, Utrecht, The Netherlands; Department of Clinical Psychology and Experimental Psychopathology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands Correspondence M.S.Stroebe@uu.nl 2015; Stroebe et al., Jewish Home Lifecare, Research Institute on Aging, New York, NY 10025, USA 2013) that affects all members of the family and their relationships – including the dyad that is the focus of this article– yet bereavement theory and research have focused primarily on individual grief, with insufficient attention to the effect of death on the family as a relational system (Breen et al., 2019; Stroebe et al., 2013; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013). Furthermore, the literature on coping with loss continues to study parental loss of an adult child and widowhood largely independently, resulting in scarce knowledge on bereaved parents' relationship with the nuclear family of the deceased, including the spouse or DIL and her children or the bereaved parents' grandchildren.

Culture defines and shapes grief (Rosenblatt, 2008). The sociocultural context of grief is important for understanding the relationship between widows and bereaved mothers. In Jewish culture, mourning practices highlight the family as the main context of grief and support. The loss is followed by the *Shiva*, or seven-day mourning period, which is dedicated to family gatherings. Thirty days after the loss, a special memorial service is held, followed by annual meetings at the graveyard (Malkinson & Bar-Tur, 2000).

The loss of one's child has a dedicated name in Hebrew, *shechol*, which is most commonly used with reference to the loss of a (young) family member while serving in the security forces. Collectively, the families inflicted by such loss are referred to collectively as the "*shechol* family", and enjoy a revered social and national status (Ben-Asher & Lebel, 2010). The social and state recognition of their pain and sacrifice form a uniquely tight bond between personal and national loss (Malkinson & Bar-Tur, 2000).

The research question was: How do widows perceive the dynamic of their relationships with their mothers-in-law? And how do bereaved mothers perceive the dynamic of their relationships with their daughters-in-law?

Method

The dynamics of these relationships were studied using a qualitative methodology in the phenomenological tradition (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Participants

The sample included ten bereaved mothers (MIL) and ten widows (DIL) from different families, whose sons/husbands died under various circumstances while serving in the Israeli military, police and other security forces. Of the deceased sons/husbands, seven were killed in road accidents, six on active duty, one in a natural disaster, four of disease, one in combat and one in a terrorist attack. The participants were recruited by social workers in the Family and n Commemoration Department until we have reached saturation.

The participants were contacted with the help of social workers in the Family and Commemoration Department of the Ministry of Defense. At the time of death of the husbands/sons, the widows' (DIL) ages ranged from 25-43 ($M = 33$), and they were mothers of children in elementary school age or younger. The bereaved mothers' ages ranged from 48-72 years ($M = 59$). At the time of the interviews, the widows' (DIL) ages ranged from 32-56 years ($M = 45.4$ years). The bereaved mothers' ages ranged from 56-87 years ($M = 68.4$).

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to investigate the subjective experience of the bereaved mothers (MIL) and of the widows (DIL) with respect to the dynamics of their relations over time. An interview guide was written, beginning with a broad question about family relationships, and going on to emphasize the relations between the DIL and the MIL. Three experienced social workers (with 12–30 years of practical experience with bereaved families, as part of their clinical work) conducted the interviews. None of these social workers worked directly with the participants within the framework of their job. They were trained by the authors in conducting in-depth qualitative interviews. The interviews took place in the homes of the respondents; on average, they lasted from an hour to an hour and a half. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of interview data was carried out in several stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the authors read all the interviews in sequence to become familiar with the data. Each author recorded first impressions of the interviews and extracted the main topics. Next, every interview was analyzed separately by the authors. The authors conducted an inductive open coding process to derive the units of meaning from each interview, followed by identifying recurring patterns of significance in the various interviews and combining them into categories. In the third stage, the authors examined the categories and grouped them into sub themes and themes (see table 1), first sorted separately by interview, then for all the interviews together. In the course of the analysis, the authors compared and discussed their findings.

Trustworthiness

The authors analyzed the transcripts separately. They discussed coding together to identify the differences in perception and bridge the gaps, until consensus was reached. In the last stages of the research process, we conducted peer debriefing to reexamine our assumptions and interpretation of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work at Sapir Academic College. The interviewees received a detailed explanation about the purpose of the research and were briefed regarding the protection of the confidentiality of their personal information. Each signed an informed consent form. All identifying details were obscured to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Information obtained during the interviews was not made available to the social workers in charge of the participants' cases.

Results

Three themes arose from the analysis, all revolving around various forms of conflict and violence between the MILs and DILs: (1) Fighting over the memory of the deceased; (2) tensions around the relationship with the children/grandchildren; and (3) Offensive communication patterns.

Table 1: Interview Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1: Fighting over the memory of the deceased.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Customs and rituals related to the loss. 2. Money conflicts. 3. Guilt and blaming between the two women.
2: Conflicts around the relationship with the children/grandchildren	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ignoring the children. 2. Cutting off the relationship. 3. Preventing contact and lawsuits.
3: Offensive communication patterns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Offensive nonverbal communication. 2. Fights during family meetings. 3. Indirect communication.

“Surveillance cameras in the graveyard”: Fighting over the Memory of the Deceased

The first major theme that arose from the interview analysis was the different lifecycle stage of the widows (DIL) and bereaved mothers., resulting in constant tension and a sense of never-ending conflict, with the word “war” constantly being repeated in the descriptions of the MIL-DIL relationship. As Nurit, a DIL, put it:

War is waged between widows and parents. I don't know why but it's there. I began feeling it very early. At first I thought these were all kinds of mental stuff that I was going through with myself, and then I figured out, and also heard some other widows talking, and it's like we're totally in a battlefield. Who is closer? Whom did he love more? So maybe there's this kind of fight between a daughter in-law and her mother in-law – who loves more.

As will be describe below, this tension aroused over customs and rituals related to the loss, money, and was expressed in guilt and blaming between the two women.

Often, the conflict erupted over customs and rituals related to the loss, such as arguments over where the dead would be buried and who is to decide, where the memorial service is to be held or even where the memorial candle should be lighted:

She wanted the candle. So, my son said, no, the candle stays at mommy's home. Everybody's coming to mommy's home. This entire conflict began this way, just like that. It's because of the candle on the thirtieth day [after the death] when her mother came barging in – they were just looking for an excuse to break it all up (Fanny, MIL).

This confrontation often took place in the graveyard itself:

She came to the graveyard to take out the flowers we put, and threw them away, and this was not the first time. We waged war in the graveyard with her. At one point my husband said, I've had enough. From now on we're not doing anything, no flower or nothing. I said no! We'll do it to spite her. She pulls them out, we're putting flowers back in. Until our hands would hurt. (Dora, MIL)

Another conflictual issue was money. The different lifecycle stages of the DILs and MILs mean that the former have to see for their children's livelihood, whereas the MILs focus on their rights as bereaved mothers, often leading the two to financial strife. In some cases, these arguments have led to lawsuits, and in some cases even to physical violence. Ruti, an MIL, described her conflict with her DIL as follows:

[...] after a year she sent me a letter from a lawyer, that she wanted part of the house... She's talking in the name of her daughter, money" ...she's worried about her daughter... She tells everyone that "we're hungry for money" ... that I told her, "Come live next to us...", and she says that I'm threatening her. I hit her, and I pulled on her hair and her glasses flew off.

This tension is expressed in guilt and blaming between the two women, a subject discussed among the widows (DIL) themselves. Since as early as the *Shiva*, widows (DIL) describe being blamed for the loss, a feeling that was often the root of the family conflict leading to the disconnection if not war between the DIL and MIL. Sarah, a DIL, described it as follows:

It was at the Shiva that they blamed me, that it was because of me that he died. I don't know how they got to it. And they talked about me and that's what made me cut off the relationship, finish with the Shiva and run away from there. I just didn't want to be with them.

Conversely, Shula described blaming her DIL for the death of her son: "What can I do? It's the curse – what can I do? So deep within me it's the curse, cause that's exactly what happened! She told him, 'You'll go and won't come back', and that's exactly how it was".

Regardless of the immediate "casus belli", the war tends to be long, with the two parties keeping a ledger of blames and complaints. Shlomit, for example, described her relationship with her DIL as follows:

I said, my tears will not be shed in vain. She'll pay – one pays in this world. Once you go to heaven, you're clean. You pay all your bills down here. It's like when you enter the factory you punch your card, that's how you do with God. And she'll pay. [...] now she's all good, but in time, how do they say? The sun doesn't shine only in one place. It shines everywhere. Her day will come.

"The children lost not only their dad": Conflicts around the Relationship with the Children/Grandchildren

A major cause of conflicts between MILs and DILs is the relationship with the children/Grandchildren. Once the mediator, the son/husband, is gone, the continuity of the relationship with the bereaved parents becomes an issue. This conflict has led to ignoring the children, cutting off the relationship, preventing contact and even lawsuits.

In all families, the relationship with the children/grandchildren was of central importance and was usually the main reason for maintaining the relationship between the MIL and DIL to begin with, while at the same time serving as a major if not the main source of tension. Insufficient contact between the children and bereaved parents often led to bitterness, pain and insult. Apparently DILs, but also MILs, often used the children as a way of punishing one another. Dora described how her DIL kept her grandchildren away from her to hurt her: "Three years we suffered from that. Whether it's words coming out of her mouth and her behavior, how each time she would teach the children not to give kisses, not to say goodbye". Shula, another MIL, described a similar situation, which began before the loss: "Each time she had a little fight, that was our punishment, it would be us who wouldn't see the girl [...]. And in fact even after he died she gave us the same punishment, we never saw the kids after that".

Some of the DILs described how it was the MIL that pulled away or even completely avoided seeing her grandchildren, which offended them extremely as they considered it to be damaging the children. As Moriah said, "In his Bar-Mitzvah they brought him nothing. It's not the money, it's the attitude". Dana said, "It hurt me that the children lost not only their dad, but also the contact with those who remember his childhood and can tell them about it".

In some families, this conflict led to lawsuits: "I got to the point of fighting in court for my right to see the child. My daughter in-law stopped answering the phone, pushed the child away. I don't know why she's not talking to me" (Fanny MIL).

Other MILs felt they had no choice but to give up on their children to avoid any more conflicts:

My daughter in-law said, "If you're coming to the child's graduation party, I'm calling the police". So I told him, I won't have it... we're saying goodbye. I came over and she shouted to the kids that I was doing bad things. I gave them a kiss and said, come visit when you grow up (Rosa).

"Looks that can kill": Offensive Communication Patterns

Offensive communication patterns, the third theme, were described by most (16) participants. These included offensive nonverbal communication, fights during family meetings, and indirect communication that conveyed insulting messages from either side, offending the other and leading to disconnection or further conflict. Rina, an MIL, described this as follows:

I most certainly do not intend to go to her mother's house. Her mother and brother had laughed at me at the graveyard. So we had a fight there.. It was on the memorial day. They laughed at me. So... I cursed her there and said I was sorry. I cursed her mother. I told her, my son went away with dignity...

Nonverbal and indirect offensive communication was also mentioned by many participants on both sides as their reason for remaining distant, cutting off the relationship or engaging in conflict:

Why did we get to this situation? If you say that I frowned at them because they... in the ten days they grieved I frowned at them, made a face, scowled, I don't know,

blurted out a word, I don't know. (Shlomit, MIL)

You're sitting Shiva and you begin to see all the words being said, all the looks, those half-sentences. You go through the months and after that she lets slip, back to normal now. So I don't usually answer, I pretend not to hear. It went on escalating through the years, all the movements, what you're doing and what you're not, they're getting into the details, where's the money, where's this and where's that. (Ronit, DIL)

Apparently, the "prescheduled" meetings around the grieving, the *Shiva* and the memorials became triggers for offensive communication:

When we had the annual memorial they jumped up, didn't talk nicely, I didn't answer. Somebody else would have ended the entire relationship. [...] They keep bickering among themselves [...]. I don't think we can fix this because you need to have both sides wanting peace [...]. Whatever I did, they remained stuck in the same place.

A particularly offensive form of communication, mentioned mainly by the DILs, was using third parties to convey messages. Miri quoted her children as follows:

They told me mom, it's good that you didn't keep in touch with them. They're really creepy. To tell you the truth, I didn't know. I was even afraid to ask what was said there or what went on there, but I did manage to talk to my daughter a little about it. My daughter said, "Mom, look, they started saying things and blaming you, saying all kinds of stuff about you".

Sometimes, it was the insults conveyed indirectly through the children that led the DIL to break off the relationship and keep her children away:

*After I went out, she said about me, "That disgusting b***h". My daughter was there and they started cursing me, and my daughter came back home crying and said, I took a bite and it couldn't pass down my throat, they cursed you and said, mom's a b***h, may she catch fever until she dies and may her luck run out. (Ronit)*

Nevertheless, in some of the families, after a period of distancing due to the offensive communication, the women realized the price that

was paid, and learned how to change their conduct and put an end to the insults to improve the relationship.

To give up – if you don't nothing happens. If she says a word to you and you answer her back with her word, know that this only brings anger, and this is how I realized it, because that's the way it was at the beginning. [...] this used to lead to anger and arguments [...]. And then I wouldn't see the children for two weeks, a month, two or three and I would eat my heart out, until I said, alright already, let her say what she wants, so long as she brings the kids to see me, whatever she says I'll answer amen, and that's how it was. (Shula)

Finally, this is how Judith described her choice to hold back and change her relations with her DIL to prevent a breakup:

In shechol, you must learn how to swallow frogs – I think this is true in life in general. So OK, they chirp and trill and make lots of noise, but it's just a frog after all. And I keep being part, I keep on with the things that are my responsibility [...] and what I chose to delegate to them, I chose [...] with goodwill. We're not rushing headlong into war.

Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed that most participants had reported on conflict experienced as part of the relationship in the multigenerational bereaved family. These manifested in acts of verbal and nonverbal aggression, cursing and yelling, economic conflicts, breakups, as well as physical violence. In some families The three main themes of this conflict that were found in this research were fighting over the memory of the deceased, the relationship with the children/grandchildren, and offensive communication patterns.

,The conflicts had started before the loss, but in most the aggression or violence began and escalated following it.

The findings shed light on a complex and highly conflictual relationship between Israeli bereaved mothers in-law (MILs) and widows, or daughters in-law (DILs), who have lost a son/husband while serving in the security forces.

These findings are consistent with recent studies emphasizing the conflictual nature of the MIL-DIL relationship (Kim & Kim, 2015; Rittenour, 2012; Shih & Pyke, 2016, Segev et al,

2021), and the long-term effects of bereavement, and stressing that the experience of mourning changes over time for both bereaved parents (Malkinson & Bar-Tur, 2005) and widows (Bokek-Cohen, 2014; Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2019). It appears that mourning exacerbates pre-existing rifts, given the son/husband's common role as a mediator between the women (Bryant et al., 2001; Rittenour & Kellas, 2015; Segev et al., 2020) , the different lifecycle stage, and the MILs' reduced ability to maintain contact with the grandchildren.

After the loss, the DIL's remain responsible for the relationship between the MILs and their grandchildren. It appears that when the DILs experienced offensive conduct, some of them used the children as a weapon against their grandmother, the MIL, by preventing them from meeting, while some MILs ended all contact with the grandchildren as a result of the conflictual relationship with the DIL.

Note, however, that whereas most participants described tension and conflict in their relationship, a minority among them described a good relationship, and that some of the families that had experienced intercultural conflicts achieved reconciliation after changing their communication patterns from offensive to respectful, thereby strengthening the relation between the MIL and the family of origin to the grandchildren. Nevertheless, even when reconciliation was finally achieved, this was after years of in-fighting.

From a broader cultural perspective, the intensity of the conflicts described above, that involved, in most cases, aggression and sheer violence, is somewhat surprising as it runs counter the perception of military grief in Israeli society. Israelis revere families who have experienced loss under circumstances related to the Israeli-Arab conflict, and the cultural master-narrative sanctifies the sacrifice made by the dead, as well as the families that live on after them (Ben-Asher & Lebel, 2010). In fact, there is a clear hierarchy of loss in Israel, with *shechol* families at the top (Malkinson & Bar-Tur, 2000).

It is perhaps due to that prevailing cultural attitude that the frequent conflicts in the relations between bereaved mothers and their daughter's in-law have gone unrecognized. The present study reveals the social silencing of these conflicts, which Zerubavel (2010) described as "a conspiracy of silence".

Indeed, the participants themselves said that despite these tremendously difficult experiences,

the DIL-MIL conflicts remained unspoken, and in retrospect they expressed the need for professional help regarding this specific issue, as opposed to others more commonly addressed in the meetings with them, such as various welfare rights and benefits. Thus, despite being recognized within the boundaries of the *shechol* family in Israel, the conflict remains silenced both within it and most certainly outside it, and, to paraphrase the words of one of the participants, the message conveyed to the members of this family by Israeli society is that “in *shechol* you have to swallow frogs”.

In addition to the nearly sacred status of the *shechol* family in Israel, another reason for the silencing of the MIL-DIL conflicts has to do with gender. Feminist literature argues that women would do anything to maintain solidarity, and are expected to care for one another (Gilligan, 1982). Moreover, women are entrusted with the role of maintaining family relations, and are therefore assumed to avoid all conflicts, and certainly violent conflicts, in the name of family unity. The present findings, however, draw a different picture whereby the locus of the intergenerational conflict in families that have experienced loss is the conflict between the women, the DIL and MIL. Indeed, many participants used “masculine” terminology such as “war” and “battlefield” as metaphors for their conflict. Particularly in the context of families who have lost their loved ones in the course of their service in the military and other security forces, these metaphors seem to be particularly significant. Apparently, the external conflict not only requires Israeli families to make the utmost sacrifice but permeates them and affects the construction of their intergenerational relationships as not only complex or conflictual, but as a virtual battlefield.

Conclusions, Limitations, and future directions

The present study contributed to the scarce literature on MIL-DIL relations after the loss of a son/husband serving in the security forces, primarily by indicating the intensity and even ferociousness of the conflicts between them, even or perhaps because of the sacred nature of military grief in a country such as Israel. Our study adopted a relational and multigenerational approach to coping with loss within the family by focusing on the relationship between bereaved mothers (MIL) and widows (DIL). The findings revealed that this relationship was highly complex and dynamic. Nevertheless, it has several

limitations. First, it did not include include dyads belonging to the same family. This exploratory study may serve as a basis for future research that would include such dyads, enabling reference to the MIL-DIL dyad as the unit of analysis to derive a systemic, holistic understanding of the multigenerational family relationship after the loss. Second, because a single interview provides only a snapshot of a relationship, a longitudinal study would be required to explore the developing relationships over time, and examine whether the conflicts that begin so soon after the loss endure, and for how long. Third, the study examined the dynamics of relations between Jewish bereaved mothers(MIL) and widows(DIL); future research should include women of other ethnic origins in Israel, as well as in other countries, whether or not engaged in an intractable external conflict.

Our results have several practical implications. Social workers specializing in the field of bereavement, family therapists, counsellors, and other professionals working with bereaved families should be aware of the unspoken violence that might characterize the MIL-DIL relationship following the loss and may be able to improve their effectiveness in working with families coping with loss by considering intergenerational conflict, aggression and violence in their assessments and interventions. Specifically, the findings point to the period shortly after the loss as a critical phase in shaping that relationship. At this stage, the social worker’s intervention is critical, and may prevent future deterioration in the relationship. The complexity of the relationship after loss points to the importance of directly intervening in it to prevent escalation of conflicts between the women and in other members of the various generations of bereaved families.

Overall, the findings point to the importance of open, direct, and honest communication between bereaved mothers (MIL) and widows (DIL). Social workers may help these women openly express their feelings, thoughts and expectations of one another. Social workers should be aware of the need for ongoing support, acknowledging the ethos of military grief in Israeli society and the way it acts to silence – but not resolve – the conflicts within them. Breaking that silence will be an essential step in healing the relationship whose health is so sorely needed in the bereavement process.

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