PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE: SENSEMAKING IN PARENT-CHILD DISCUSSIONS OF DEATH

by

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ABSTRACT

Death is something everyone will one day encounter, yet American society has a tendency to avoid or deny death in everyday life and language. Death makes people uncomfortable, and many view it as a topic too complex for children to understand. Children, however, witness big and little deaths in their lives: of pets, relatives, plants, and favorite fairy tale characters. When a child experiences a death, he or she may have questions for parents or other trusted adults which our current avoidance-geared society does not prepare adults for.

Children exist in a specific cultural context, and learn rules and expectations of society from an early age. How society views a subject like death will influence how it is talked about, experienced, and learned. Parents and families serve as the primary means of socialization for young children and hold a position of expertise within the parent-child dynamic. Both socio-cultural and personal beliefs about death will influence how a parent approaches death education with his or her child.

Through examination of the sensemaking and sensegiving accounts of parent participants, this study sought to understand what the process is like for parents who are discussing the subject of death with their children, what goals and concerns parents have, what information a parent privileges as important within the social and historical context of the conversation, and what resources he or she accesses, if any, to assist with communication. By framing the participants’ experiences as “making sense” of a social environment after an interruption, this study was able to investigate the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving in an interpersonal context between parent and child, the roles of Weick’s (1995) characteristics of
sensemaking, implicit and explicit messages relayed to children about death, and the influence of social scripts on both processes.

Twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather accounts in context of parents who had previously discussed death with their children. Interviews were analyzed based on a modified constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). The study was designed to remain as close to the relayed experience of the participants as possible with hope that information from the participants’ experiences will be useful for both academics and parents as a future resource for preparing for parent-child communication about death.
This work is dedicated to the parents who so graciously offered their stories. Thank you for sharing your time and experience with a curious student.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The subject of death is something not often talked about in my family, though it is never denied. It is considered unpleasant to think about before you absolutely must, and I feel that attitude is common among others in our society. I first became interested in death-related communication after shopping for picture books for my niece. At a local thrift shop, I came across a bright yellow picture book called *When Someone in the Family Drinks Too Much* by Richard C. Langsen (1996). On the surface, the picture book appears like many of its counterparts: the front cover features a picture of two bear children and a bear adult sitting in a floral-print living room, the title font is fun looking and brightly colored, and aside from the title and the bottle of alcohol on the living room table, it could start a number of pleasant stories for small children. But upon closer inspection, the bear children are drawn with worried eyes, and the bear father has a full glass in his hand and a guilty look on his face. The first page of the book begins by explaining in terms a young child could understand what exactly an alcoholic is. The book then proceeds in a similar fashion with many colorful illustrations and educational text to explain what a blackout is, various personas children of alcoholic parents may adopt as coping mechanisms, and common emotions a child might feel in such a family situation.

My interest in these “difficult situation” picture books grew. I soon found a number of books at my university and county public library with topics like parents’ mental illness, divorce, adoption, miscarriage, and death. Many of the books seemed educational in nature, to both the child and adult readers. Frequently the books began with a “Do and Don’t” list for the adults, indicating how best to assist the child with reading the material and answering any questions on
the subject, or concluding with resources for obtaining assistance with abuse, neglect, or additional guidance. Some seemed targeted towards a younger child reading the book with the assistance of an adult, while others seemed easy enough for a child to read alone. That resources such as these existed really expanded my understanding of what, exactly, parents may have to learn “on the fly.”

Through interactions with my niece and nephews, I have learned that you cannot predict what will catch the attention of a child, or when and where a child will ask questions on something they learned or overheard previously. I have seen mothers and fathers field philosophy questions with advanced biology follow ups, with a side of “can we go to the park now.” These conversations can be exhausting to watch, never mind the energy expended by the person who has to answer the rapid-fire interrogations. Adults hold a position of expertise in the parent-child dynamic. Children seem curious about absolutely everything, and willing to ask. But what happens when an adult doesn’t know, or perhaps isn’t comfortable talking about a specific subject?

Death is something which must be discussed at some point, so is it better to discuss it before the child has direct interaction with death, or wait until the child brings it up? Does it matter? And how would a parent even know where to start? The picture books provided Do’s and Don’ts, but are parents even aware books exist specifically for *Mama’s Going to Heaven Soon*, or *A Funeral for Whiskers*, and where they can find the books? How does a parent decide if a child is really interested in knowing what death is, or if they want to know what it means for his or her favorite character in the movie they are watching?
There are many different academic fields with interests in children’s death education. Developmental and clinical psychology, nursing, education, and communication are among many diverse fields that have some body of literature pertaining to death and children, often focusing on bereavement or conceptual understanding of biological terms. This research project, itself, became both intra- and interdisciplinary, borrowing from various social science disciplines, as well as alternate areas of research within the field of communication.

The study utilized a modified grounded theory approach (modified for the requirements of a thesis project), with twelve open-ended interviews with parent participants serving as the body of data. By designing the study to remain as close to the relayed experience of the participants as possible using the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it is hoped the project yielded information useful to both academics and parents as a future resource for preparing for parent-child communication about death.

The initial aim of the study was to understand what goals and concerns parents have when educating their children about death, and how they resolve their concerns and judge the success of their achievements. I hoped to gain an understanding of what a parent privileges as important within the social and historical context of the conversation, and what resources he or she accesses, if any, to assist with communication. As interviews progressed, the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1969), borrowed from fields of organizational psychology and crisis communication, appeared most pertinent to the relayed experiences of the participants and was used as the main tool to examine the experiences they shared.
As with any study, social context is an important starting point. While there may be no one “American” ideology that encapsulates every belief held by each individual, there are dominant themes that influence socialization, creation of identity, and interpretation of events within the American cultural context.

American View of Death

In modern Western cultures, death occurs when something fails. Death is a disruption of the happy life, and often viewed as pathological (Pattinson, 1976) or pornographic (Gorer, 1955). Ariès (1974b) referenced a demand for happiness from Western culture, even with regards to death and dying. It is the “moral duty and social obligation to contribute to the collective happiness by avoiding any cause for sadness or boredom, by appearing to always be happy, even in the depths of despair” (Ariès, 1974b, p. 94). Society attempts to mystify or deny the process of natural death to promote a culture of pleasantry and happiness.

Before World War I, people died and their bodies were prepared for funeral and burial within the home (Glidden, 1963). Americans today die in hospitals more often than their homes because of factors like convenience, hygienic concerns, or medical treatment options. In the cultural psyche, modern medicine holds power over death. Death is curable, an illness which can be treated or delayed by life support machines, resuscitation devices, and other marvels of medicine and technology. When death does occur, it is most often a “discretionary death,” instead of a natural or unnatural death (Machado, 2005). Discretionary death occurs when either
the patient (or the doctors or family members on behalf of an unconscious patient) decide to stop the life-sustaining treatments (Machado, 2005).

Gorer (1955) associated death in modern Western society with the previously taboo topics of birth and copulation. In past years, children were told that babies were delivered to parents by storks instead of learning realistic human anatomy lessons or sex education, and pubescent teenagers were told cautionary myths with dire consequences of participating in sexual acts. While these older tales seem outdated or irresponsible to some, death is still cloaked in “prudery” (Gorer, 1955) and considered something not to be discussed or displayed in public.

Even death rituals and funeral preparations are means of civilizing and domesticating death by presenting a “beautiful death,” and continually holding the deceased as a part of collective memory of the living (Vernant, 1986). Ariès (1974b) indicated the act of embalming is characteristic of the North American attitude toward death. Instead of accepting death as a natural and sometimes unseemly part of life with the standard deterioration of a corpse, death is made friendly to the living. Through the mortician’s work, bodies of the deceased are made to look “almost-living” with rouged cheeks and full lips, dressed in fine clothing and surrounded in “slumber” rooms of funeral homes with colorful bouquets of flowers and calming music (Ariès, 1974a; Ariès 1974b). Friends and families come to “visit” the deceased one last time, retelling favorite stories of the deceased and looking through pictures of their lives. Often funeral services are coded as “celebrations of life” rather than a time of mourning, reinforcing the culture of happiness and banning death and sadness even at a time traditionally appropriate for grief. Ariès
(1974a) noted that American society has “in a general way honored its dead while refusing them the status of death” (p. 558).

In a culture which denies death even to the deceased by masquerading them as “almost-living,” little room is afforded to grieving friends and family for anything but happiness, genuine or feigned. Pattinson (1976) referred to death as pathological because the taboos of our culture restrict the ability to successfully cope with death and grief. People generally do not know how to address the needs of the bereaved if they have not experienced grief themselves (Herkert, 2000), and strong emotions or “inappropriate” displays are seen to infringe on the happiness of others in society. As Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014) stated, society controls bereavement by policing how the bereaved should think, feel, and behave. Irwin (1991) mentioned a view common in American society that the expression of grief is a “crass self-indulgence”; discussion of one’s grief in public is selfish and displaying the negative emotions common with grief to others insensitive. There is a demand of silence placed upon both the dying and their survivors to not create emotional “scenes” in public. Those who grieve openly are labelled abnormal or aberrant (Neimeyer et al., 2014) and often avoided, instead of supported during their time of need (Ariès, 1974a).

**Children and Death**

It is difficult to have any sort of conversation about what may or may not be appropriate for children without speaking in terms of age or developmental understanding. Research on children’s death education has focused for many years on children's understanding of the death
concept (Slaughter, 2005). Harris and Giménez (2005) mentioned that children’s understanding of death has been studied from three different traditions historically: psychoanalytic studies focused on the emotional impact of death throughout a child’s lifespan, clinical studies focused on children’s reactions to death, and cognitive-developmental studies focused on the rate and stages of concept acquisition. As is common in other areas of developmental psychology, understanding of the biological concept of death is proposed to occur in stages. Developmental psychology tells us that children begin to develop a multidimensional concept of death as they move from early to middle childhood (Slaughter & Lyons, 2003). Such a concept includes the understanding that death is permanent and beings will not return to life (Irreversibility or Finality), that the body no longer operates after death (Nonfunctionality or Cessation), that death is universal and everything will die at some point in time (Inevitability), and an accurate understanding of the causes of death (Causality) (Poling & Hupp, 2008; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007; Speece & Brent, 1984).

While studies vary widely in method and measure, it is agreed that the subconcepts of death are attained in a relatively ordered progression with a complete, or “mature” understanding of death typically acquired around age 10 (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). Between the ages of 2 and 6, children often imagine death as temporary and reversible. They may not understand the true cause of death and may believe a negative thought about the deceased caused the death (Himebaugh, Arnold, & May, 2008). Furman (1978) explained that children before the age of 5 or 6 have difficulty understanding abstract ideas, and may distort philosophical or religious notions surrounding death into more concrete concepts. Inevitability can be misunderstood in
young children and cause unwarranted fear about the ‘future’ death occurring immediately.
Children aged 6 to 8 begin to understand the concept of Irreversibility, but may have difficulty understanding the Inevitability aspect of death (Himebauch et al., 2008). Attention has recently been given to the influence of religion and spirituality on a child’s understanding of death, and how a religious upbringing may cause “biological misconceptions” about Irreversibility and Nonfunctionality (Harris & Giménez, 2005; Renaud, Engarhos, Schleifer, & Talwar, 2013; Rosengren, Gutiérrez, & Schein, 2014a; Rosengren, Gutiérrez, & Schein, 2014b).

**Media.** Our society views children as naïve and innocent, and adults assume children do not, or should not, think about death (Kastenbaum & Fox, 2007). Discussion of death may be difficult for caregivers to initiate or navigate, but death is highly visible in the everyday lives of children through media (Coombs, 2014). Even with review organizations which rate appropriateness of movies, video games, or television shows for children based on content, death still appears in picture books (see for example Corr, 2003; Gutiérrez, Miller, Rosengren, & Schein, 2014; Lee, Kim, Choi, & Koo, 2014; Wiseman, 2013), children’s movies (Cox, Garrett, & Graham, 2004), and even some E-Rated video games (Thompson & Haninger, 2001).

In a study of Disney films, Cox, Garrett, and Graham (2004) found that many of the stories had characters (heroes or villains) die during the plot, but the death was often only implied, happened off-screen, and did not acknowledge or use death terminology. A recent example mentioned by multiple participants is the Disney movie *Frozen* (2013). When the main character’s parents die (off screen, in a shipwreck), a black cloth is placed over a framed picture, implying the death but not directly addressing it.
Many times fairy tales, and the movies or books based on them, convey unrealistic images of death. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, for example, have curses cast upon them by evil witches intending to cause death. Instead of dying, however, the curse is changed by a good witch to cause the appearance of death; they simply sleep peacefully forever, or until their sleeping forms are kissed by their true loves. The images of Snow White in her glass coffin and the like confuse the idea of death as a permanent biological end to life. These ideas of death may be internalized by children and lead to misconceptions when parents evade death education talks or do not address the child’s concerns in concrete or biological terms.

**Western Conception of Childhood**

Western society has a complex view of childhood. Childhood itself is a difficult term to define, and as Ariès (1962) illustrated, differs in conception with social and historical conditions. In common English usage, childhood describes the age range from birth to adolescence, with varying stages of infancy, toddlerhood, and puberty included. Children, or those within the “childhood” age range, are perceived as non-adults (or not-yet adults) and believed to be qualitatively different (Ariès, 1962) and in some cases inferior as a product of their age and inexperience. Children have been perceived as little angels (Romantic view), little devils (Puritanical view), blank slates (Roseau’s “tabula rasa”), and variations thereof throughout history (Synott, 1983). Adults since the 17th century have viewed childhood as a time of innocence, and have acted to safeguard children from the “pollution of life” (Ariès, 1962, p. 119)
while at the same time nurturing manners and attitudes befitting the adults children will one day become (Wyness, 2006).

Adult society constructs “the grammar of child,” or what it means to be a child, how a child should behave, what a child thinks, and what is best for a child (Peters & Johansson, 2012), which is taught to youth by adults, internalized, and reproduced by children (Stowe, 2010). This “institutionalized childhood” keeps children separate from adults (Bühler-Niederberger, 2010), and positions children and adults as two ends of a dichotomy. Adults are mature, logical, and can understand complicated situations. Children, by contrast, are immature and emotional, and are “not adult-enough” (read: too young) to comprehend certain things. Adults often restrict access to events and ideas which are not typically characterized by folk theory as appropriate for children. Folk theories are culturally bound, and change with the social environment (Harkness & Super, 1996). Folk theories held by parents are influenced by their own personal upbringing and experiences, cultural beliefs or expectations, media, and stories or advice offered by others within the social group (Miller, Rosengren, & Gutiérrez, 2014b). Folk theories often relate directly to their understandings of and behavior towards their children, including the way parents communicate with their children or when expert advice should be sought (Harkness & Super, 1996).

Miller, Gutiérrez, Chow, and Schein (2014a) and Miller, Rosengren, and Gutiérrez (2014b) found a dominant folk theory in their study on how death should be addressed with young children, which included primarily the belief that children need to be shielded from death
because they do not have the cognitive or emotional capacity to understand and cope with death, which manifested as reported avoidance behaviors.

**Communicating about Death**

Hesitation to discuss death openly with a child may indicate death is a topic not to be acknowledged or discussed (Weber & Fournier, 1986). Within the parent-child dynamic, parents are the experienced individuals who serve as primary sources of information for their children about death (Glass, 1991). In multiple studies, caregivers reported avoidance or discomfort when talking to their children about death and dying (McGovern & Barry, 2000; Miller et al., 2014a; Nguyen & Rosengren, 2004). This reticence may derive from the parents’ own emotional state while grieving or fear of death (Furman, 1978; Koocher, 1975), the desire to shield children from the difficult realities of life and death as long as possible (Miller et al., 2014a; Miller et al., 2014b), the belief that death is too complicated or mature a concept for children to understand (Aiken, 2001; Beale, Sivesind, & Bruera, 2004), or the fear of causing harm to the child by saying or doing something incorrectly (Melvin & Lukeman, 2000).

Walsh and McGoldrick (1991) examined loss from a family systems perspective, and noted that while the family can be seen as one functional unit of analysis, a family is comprised of many subunits (i.e. individuals, dyads, small groups) which may respond to grief in different manners. One of the primary tasks a family must complete after a loss is to acknowledge and share the experience of that loss among family members, which is best done through open communication of clear information about the death, and the range of feelings resulting from it.
Clinicians and educators also emphasize that open communication about death before a child has personal experience with loss can help reduce misconceptions, relieve anxiety, and prepare children for future experiences with death and grief (Melvin & Lukeman, 2000; Weber & Fournier, 1985).

**Resources.** Parent-child communication research typically focuses on health campaigns (ex: alcohol and tobacco usage, sex education, suicide prevention) with an emphasis on "how effective" parents are at influencing the child's behavior. Social science research does not provide the same body of literature for death education as for other difficult communication topics, even though there are academic journals dedicated specifically to thanatology in the fields of psychology, nursing, sociology, and counseling research. Numerous scholars talk about death, but few are talking about *talking about* death. There are limited studies on how death is actually explained to young children (Renaud et al., 2013), and only a few examine if parents actually *have* death education conversations with their children (Toller & McBride, 2013).

Renaud, Engarhos, Schleifer, and Talwar (2015) utilized an online questionnaire to determine if parents had discussed death with their children, what themes were present in those conversations, and parental satisfaction with the death conversation. Parent participants indicated they first had conversations with their children between 3 and 3.5 years of age, the majority of participants mentioned having between 2 and 5 conversations about death with their youngest child, and nearly all provided an explanation to their children about death (Renaud et al., 2015). Participants were offered the option to type in additional description of their explanation of death, and explanations were then analyzed using an extant coding scheme. Parents commonly
referenced religious or spiritual aspects of death, and frequently mentioned a continued existence after death (Renaud et al., 2015). Parents reported a higher satisfaction with their explanations when they were considered more comforting, such as conversations which incorporated talk of some continued existence after death (Renaud et al., 2015).

Communication research often focuses on the experience of a death as a categorical or predictor variable instead of a communication event worth investigating and understanding. Much of the literature on children and death comes from bereavement studies, which are more focused on circumstances following a death in the child’s life, instead of the death education a child receives (Saldinger et al., 2004). Studies on death education most frequently involve undergraduate students recalling their own personal experiences with death as children or parent participants.

In a study of recollections of their first experience with death, undergraduates in Dickenson’s (1992) study recalled vivid memories of pet death (28%) or the death of a relative (57%). The average age of first death experience in this study was eight years old, indicating memories of a child’s first experience with death were retained at least ten years later into adulthood (Dickenson, 1992). Knight, Elfenbein, and Capozzi (2000) also investigated recollections of undergraduate students with the intent of analyzing current death attitudes in relation to first death experience. Similar to the types of first death experience from Dickenson’s (1992) study, 56% of participants in Knight et al.’s (2000) study reported the death of a relative, and 23% indicated their first experience with death was that of a pet. Researchers found a difference in current fear of death by type of loss. Participants whose parents had discussed death
after the loss of a pet had lower current fear of death than their counterparts who had discussed
death with their parents after the loss of a relative. Knight et al. (2000) cautioned that this could
be the result of many different factors, including the perceived threat of death for the participant
(animal compared to human death), the emotional state of the caregiver discussing death, and the
attentiveness to questions and needs of participants during the discussion of death. What was
surprising about this study of over 200 participants was that over half of the undergraduate
students surveyed reported that their parents did not talk to them about death after their first
death experience, and many mentioned they had unanswered questions about death and what
happened to those who had died. This recollection of no conversation could be an error in
memory, as for many their first death experience happened at least ten years prior, or could
indicate a lack of conversation about death between parents and children.

Toller and McBride (2013) interviewed parents to see what motivated their participants to
either have or avoid a conversation about the death of a loved one with their children. Toller and
McBride examined the interviews as instances of privacy management, and found that parents
who disclosed about death to their children were tried to help their children understand and work
through their grief. Parent participants in the study primarily referenced religion in their
explanations of death and an afterlife, especially if they believed death was too upsetting or
complicated for their child to understand (Toller & McBride, 2013).

Turner et al. (2007) worked with women diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer to
discover what resources they had available to them concerning discussion of their health issues
and death with children. Women in the study noted a scarcity of resources available, with no
clear way of identifying the accuracy or timeliness of what few resources they did have access to. They mentioned a hesitancy of healthcare professionals to offer advice on how to best discuss death with their children, and frequently relied on social support groups and others who had gone through similar circumstances for guidance and direction. While the study specifically examined resources available to parents with late-stage cancer, many of the same issues would likely apply to parents approaching death education with their children.

For decades, academics in various fields have published on children and death. Much of this research is written for an academic audience, and it is difficult to say if the results ever reach the “front lines” of parents who interact directly with children. For a more secular audience, there are self-help books written by academics or lay people, books intended specifically for children as educational material, and even online resources like blogs which provide a plethora of (sometimes conflicting) information for parents concerning death education. Many of these and the academic resources appear prescriptive rather than descriptive, with cautionary lists of “Do’s and Don’ts” for death education conversations, and it is difficult to ascertain how frequently these resources are utilized by parents or what degree of reliability parents ascribe to them. If parents feel there are no reliable sources of information available, it may limit willingness to initiate death education discussions with children causing avoidance when questions are raised by a child, or delaying death education until a life-event occurs where a child has unavoidable experience with death.

It is also worthwhile to consider, from a parent’s perspective, who is an expert. Academics convey expertise by citing other academics who they have studied or worked with,
but parents may not understand or put much stock in the “classics.” Parents may consider the narratives of friends or family members to be more reliable than information coming from a child psychologist, or may value the opinions of the child’s teacher or community religious leader more than a Hospice publication. For the purposes of this study, the status of expert is held by the parent participants. It is their frame of reference I attempt to understand, their own experiences and beliefs, and their metacommunicative recollections I rely on to try and gain a better understanding of the goals and concerns parents face when communicating about death with children. The aim of this study is to explain the sensemaking process parents experience when participating in death-related communication with their children, and to examine what type of explanation is presented to their children through the sensegiving process.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the main questions I had as a researcher at the start of this study was “what would I do?” I am not a parent, and have never had to explain something like death, at any level of understanding, to a child. I initially figured that I would likely check my own personal and social resources (aka: my mother and my researching skills) to decide what information I would relay to my hypothetical child. One of the guiding questions in the initial interviews asked participants what type of resources they sought when they knew this conversation was coming, and to my consternation, the response I received was that the participants mostly “wing it.” This did not fit with my initial assumption that people would drop everything and call their parents (my assumed actions), but with clarification and through continued conversation with other participants, it was revealed that “winging it” may be more a feeling about the situation than an action.

A few participants offered remembered stories of explanations from when they were children, descriptions of their personal religious views, or concerns over what they didn’t want to say to their children. It seemed there was more than recommended resources involved in the creation of messages for children, including the parents’ own past experiences, identity, social environment, and of course what type of event sparked the conversation. Parents must come to an understanding of the events (is the child asking what dead means, or what dead means for the character in a story they are reading?), an understanding of what they want to say, and then explain it to their children in a way that makes sense and satisfies the needs of the situation.

It appeared that Weick’s (1969) sensemaking process was the best fit with the emerging data, as it situates both the actor and the event within a social context, takes into account varying
aspects of identity a person may hold, corresponds to the notion that understanding complex ideas is often an ongoing conversation, and allows that a person’s definition of an object or event sets into motion specific actions that limit how they can interact with that same object or event. While there are other depictions of sensemaking (or sense-making, sense making, etc.) that are also grounded in communication and interpretation, Weick’s sensemaking was the most congruous with the relayed experiences of the participants.

Weick’s (1969) sensemaking is typically studied within the context of organizational communication, and looks specifically at how an individual (as part of a larger organization) creates and shares meaning to recover after an interruption. In other words, sensemaking is concerned with how organizations “make sense” of disruptions in their environments. To best apply sensemaking to the family context of death-related talks, the family will be viewed as a social organization dealing with an interruption of typical experience brought about by the experience of a death, or conversation about death.

**Organization**

While commonly thought of as business or formally established groups, the broader definition of organization by Wash and Ungson (1991) is adopted for this study; an organization is “a network of intersubjectively shared meanings that are sustained through the development and use of a common language and everyday social interaction” (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, p. 60, paraphrasing Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Organizations are not necessarily companies, businesses, or interest groups with rigid infrastructure and reactionary natures rooted in policy and
procedures. Instead, organizations are abstract concepts shared among people united through a common purpose (Starbuck, 2015; Weick, 1979). It has been argued that family is best studied and assisted when considered a social organization (Briar, 1964). A social organization is simply defined as “a group of people who co-operate and co-ordinate their efforts in order to achieve certain goals,” (p. 248). The inverse, an organization as a family, is a common metaphor for organizations that promote specific attitudes, beliefs, and corporate values which sponsor familiar relationships between employees and management, and feelings of responsibility, attachment, and identification with the job (Casey, 1999; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

An organization is evaluated based on progress towards its goals, and in order to appropriately judge success or failure, an understanding of the aims and goals pursued is required (Briar, 1964). Similar to any other organization, a family has certain goals which must be understood as motivating factors for action and interaction. There are certain goals established for families with children by external society, such as successful rearing of those children which includes their physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development. Families are considered the primary site of socialization for children, and thus are a prime site of sensemaking and sensegiving (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015). Social norms and expectations are passed to children explicitly through direct messages and implicitly through observable behavior, storytelling, and ambient messages (Buzzanell, Berkelaar, & Kisselburgh, 2011; Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015). Families may also have internally created goals, such as maintaining observance of a specific religion or achieving a certain level of financial success. Goals may change or shift in importance over time, and even interaction-by-interaction.
Parents may have the overall goals and event-specific goals that overlap, contradict, or change with time. A parent may have an immediate goal of calming a child’s emotional distress after a close death which takes temporary priority over other goals, like developing a complete understanding of the human lifecycle. Death, grief, and conversations about both occur within the extant environment of families, including their values, beliefs, and communication patterns (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). Development of an understanding of death, much like grieving and bereavement experiences examined by Bosticco and Thompson (2005), occurs and is negotiated primarily through communication of family members. Much like other organizations, it is important to understand interaction of and between family members within the context of their goals.

While most adults allow that death is an inevitable part of life, it can occur unexpectedly and is certainly not “routine.” Despite the universality of death, actual knowledge about death remains limited. Numerous authors investigating grief and bereavement have noted the importance of “making sense” of the situation for adults. Neimeyer (2000) stated the “reconstruction of meaning” both personally and interpersonally, is a central process in grieving. Shapiro (1993) suggested those who have suffered a loss must build a “cognitive understanding” and make sense of the loss and its impact on their lives (p.39). Pennebaker, Mayne, and Francis (1997) reported that making sense of an event, imposing structure and order on it, and sharing this created sense with others may also aid an individual in coping with a loss.

As these authors have said, “making sense” is important and necessary for adults experiencing a loss - adults who have personal experience with death, social scripts to work with,
and a more developed perception of the lifecycle. Children do not have the same strength of resources and substrate knowledge to make sense of death and dying on their own, yet little is known about how adults introduce children to the concept of death and socialize them into a more mature understanding. If the grieving process involves sensemaking, as these authors have suggested, it is important to understand the sensemaking, sensegiving, and general socializing tools parents draw on to formulate their conversations.

**Sensemaking**

Weick introduced the concept of sensemaking in 1969 in the first edition of *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. While the writing style and approach to the subject of organizing may have been uncommon at the time, the concept of sensemaking remained active in social psychology, organizational psychology, and organizational communication research. Sensemaking concerns the process of organizing and creating meaning of extracted cues within a setting of chronic ambiguity. In the sensemaking process, individuals notice, extract, and process cues believed to be significant, rationalize interpretations of those cues based on previous experience, and enact order into the environment (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Sensemaking itself is an ongoing interpretive, retrospective and improvisational process of organizing through which organizations (and the people within those organizations) ascribe meaning to their experiences based on personal or shared interpretation of events (Zwijze-Koning, De Jong, & Van Vuuren, 2015). Weick defined the process most simply in an interview for the Harvard Business Review (Coutu, 2003) when he said “…for me, it is the transformation
of raw experience into intelligible world views” (p. 88). During the process of sensemaking, stimuli are placed into some sort of framework which is then acted upon, tested, discarded, or retained based on its fit with the environment (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Weick, 1995).

Cartography and maps are frequently referenced when explaining sensemaking; Weick (1995) has indicated that sensemaking is similar to making a usable map of a new area. Boundaries must be defined and paths chosen, all the while understanding the map is new and may be flawed. If navigation of the new area using the created map is successful, the map is retained and used again in the future. Much like cartographers, parents are typically the ones charged with guiding conversation. If a parent does not have a reliable reference “map” for dialogue about death with children, a new one must be created. Parents must notice cues from the environment (such as the prompt for the death-related conversation), interpret those cues in context of their own personal and family goals (e.g., do we value a specific religious explanation?), and enact that created sense into their own environments (explain the situation to the child).

The “substance” of sensemaking itself (or what is actually being “processed” during sensemaking) starts with three elements: a current cue, a frame of reference, and a sense that the two may be related (Weick, 1995). Frames are often past moments of socialization stored as part of social scripts, and referenced when current experience seems in some way similar to previous experience. If the current situation is evaluated as similar enough to events within the social script, a sensemaker will act on the situation in accordance with that script. If, however, there is
no “prototypical” social script that relates to the current situation, or current scripts seem inadequate, the sensemaker must flesh out a new script, which can be a time consuming process (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking is a social and collaborative process where shared vocabularies, previous experiences, assigned meanings, and social scripts help to answer the questions of what is going on, and what is the next step. As mentioned by Zhang, Xie, and Maier (2013), cognition, emotion, and action are key to the sensemaking process. The reciprocal exchanges between the environment and those enacting their meaning into the environment make sensemaking an adaptable, co-creational activity. As noted by Weick et al. (2005), “…sensemaking is, importantly, an issue of language, talk, and communication” (p. 409). By creating these “maps” and enacting them, individuals and organizations are performing and creating their own environments in situ. Sensemaking utilizes enactment theory (people create their own environments through noticing and action, which in turn constrains their future actions) while incorporating other pertinent characteristics such as social collaboration, individual and organizational identity, and feedback loops (Weick, 1995).

**Phases of sensemaking.** Weick (1995) said sensemaking is best understood as a set of heuristics rather than a concrete algorithm or model. Weick et al. (2005) later clarified that sensemaking can be roughly understood as a sequence with “reciprocal exchanges between actors (Enactment) and their environments (Ecological Change) that are made meaningful (Selection) and preserved (Retention)” (p. 414).
Ecological change. Sensemaking occurs primarily in the face of the unusual. While living in a complex modern world requires sensemaking (Starbuck, 2015), most day-to-day navigating occurs without notice, utilizing unconscious application of cognitive scripts (Abelson, 1976). An individual is continuously noticing and attending to stimuli, interpreting ambiguous events, and responding in kind. When events are unusual, unexpected, or problematic (Wong & Weiner, 1981) and consequently cause an individual’s common scripts to fail, the sensemaking process becomes more salient to the individual or organization processing the new and strange environment. The practical starting point for discussion of sensemaking as a process is this “ecological change” where the ordinary is interrupted by some event that is novel, confusing, or ambiguous (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995).

A severe change or interruption is referred to as a cosmology episode, where a disruption is so significant that it has the potential to change a person or organization’s entire worldview (Coutu, 2003). A severe interruption like a cosmology episode typically elicits an extreme emotional response, perhaps even panic, that ensues until the interruption is resolved and reality once again matches with expectations (Weick, 1995). While any interruption of projects or the norm has the potential to cause an emotional reaction, the severity of emotional response and panic surrounding the interruption distinguishes between an unpleasant interruption and a cosmology episode (Coutu, 2003; Weick, 1995). There may be circumstances where an unexpected death, or news of a terminal diagnosis, could result in severe emotional response or panic, but for most adults death is unlikely to cause cosmology episode levels of emotional response.
**Enactment.** Through enactment, the process of sensemaking both shapes and reflects the actor’s environment (Starbuck, 2015). Weick (1988) specified the term “enactment” to indicate that people bring events, structures, and opportunities into existence through their own actions. The process of enactment, itself, can be separated into two steps (Coffelt, Smith, Sollito, & Payne, 2010; Weick, 1988). In the first step, the sensemaker becomes aware of an interruption or change in the environment. The person then “orients” to the interruption (Noticing) and pays closer attention to what may be the cause or meaning of the interruption (Weick et al., 2005). By separating specific cues from the regular steady flow of information (Bracketing), the sensemaker can begin to form an interpretation of the problem (Weick et al., 2005). The steps of noticing and bracketing are greatly influenced by the mental models or social scripts a sensemaker may be able to access.

In the second step of enactment, people act on the environment as if their preconceptions or social scripts are correct, often resulting in action which confirms the preconceived parameters or promotes self-fulfilling prophecy (Coffelt et al., 2010; Weick, 1988). As exemplified by Maslow’s (1966) law of the instrument, everything starts to look like a nail if all you have is a hammer.

The relationship between enactment and enacted environment was explained by Starbuck (2015) by stating “…people ‘enact’ their environments insofar as taken actions alter the actors’ contexts and implicitly convert the actors’ perceptions and beliefs into realities” (p. 1296). This “enacted” environment is the product of the enactment process, and incorporates any changes made to the environment through the sensemaker’s actions through social construction, and is
subject to varying interpretations (Weick, 1988). This socially created environment presents its own new set of parameters for the actor, which can provide new opportunities and constrain certain future actions (Weick, 1995).

Weick (1988) referred to the process of enactment during crises as a dilemma, because understanding a crisis as it unfolds requires action, and said action concurrently creates new raw material, cues, and possible actions or constraints which are incorporated into the sensemaking process and affects the way the crisis may unfold. The reciprocal nature of the relationship between “ecological change” and “enactment” confirms that any action taken in response to the environment and the ecological change interrupting the environment also changes the environment and how future actions may be determined.

**Selection.** During the selection phase of sensemaking, cues that were attended to through noticing and bracketing and then acted upon during the enactment phase, are simplified and interpreted in order to reduce uncertainty (Jennings & Greenwood, 2003; Miller & Horsley, 2009; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998).

While it will be discussed more in-depth in future sections, the concept of retrospect is imperative to understand and associate with the sensemaking process. Meaning is created, sense is made, by giving attention to circumstances and events which have already occurred (Weick, 1995). Actions are interpreted in a retrospective manner, not carefully planned in advance. Jennings and Greenwood (2003) stated that enactment is a “preconscious and instantaneous” process, and must be examined and evaluated in order to successfully inform future action.
In the selection phase, organizations and individuals who have experienced an interruption or crisis interpret cues selected and create plausible stories that support the developing “sense” of the environment (Weick, 2001). Through categorization and labelling (Weick et al., 2005), events and cues are simplified, differentiated from previous similar experiences, and used to create a plausible story which can then be shared with others (called sensegiving) to confirm or reject the sensemaker’s interpretation of events. If deemed accurate, the narratives are retained for use in future circumstances (Coffelt et al., 2010; Seeger et al., 2003).

**Retention.** The created story, once judged as plausible and actionable, can be saved in personal, social, or organizational memory for retrieval and action in later circumstances. The created story enters into the repertoire of social scripts which can be used to evaluate new events, indicating a feedback loop, or interrelated nature, between Retention and Enactment in the sensemaking process (Weick et al., 2005).

**Sensegiving.** Sensemaking is incomplete unless there is sensegiving, as well (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensegiving is an intentional attempt to alter how people attribute meaning to events, with little guarantee that the proposed sense will be accepted (Smerek, 2011). Sensemaking results in an understanding meant to be shared with others in order to develop coherence (Walsh & Ungson, 1991; Weick, 1995), but that created sense is still able to be changed as the creators and target audiences share and test additional interpretations. The two processes of sensemaking and sensegiving occur simultaneously and reinforce the collaborative
relationship between those making and those accepting the explanations in order to reduce uncertainty to move forward in a chaotic environment.

Research on sensegiving focuses more frequently on those in leadership roles, as it was initially equated with providing a sensible interpretation of events and persuading targets to adopt that interpretation (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Smerek, 2011). More recently, scholars like Corvellec and Risberg (2007) have argued that sensegiving is less an exercise in power and persuasion, and should instead be considered an action that influences the audience to accept a preferred definition or interpretation of events. With this altered definition, sensegiving can be considered successful even without the target audience adopting the presented interpretation completely.

This adjustment to the concept of sensegiving resonates with Weick’s (1995) caution that the result of social sensemaking is not necessarily, or simply, a shared understanding, but can many times be an alignment of meaning to achieve specific goals. A person may accept another’s interpretation (even if it is not wholly believed) if the intent is compromise, goal-achievement, necessity, or they are acting under duress. The target audience has the opportunity to accept the provided interpretation, adjust it collaboratively with the sensegiver, or align to the meaning without sharing the understanding of events.

This sharing of the sense made by an individual in the context of a larger social structure is part of what makes sensemaking more than just an individual process, and allows for interpretations and stories to be stored as social scripts within organizational memory, even if the initial sensemaker is no longer present (Walsh & Ungson, 1991; Weick & Gilfillan, 1971).
**Characteristics of sensemaking.** In addition to the general phases of sensemaking and sensegiving, Weick suggested seven interrelated properties of the sensemaking process that differentiate it from other explanatory or interpretive processes (Weick, 1995, Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.

**Identity.** Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, as a person’s identity informs and constrains what the sensemaker will perceive, what actions can be taken, and how he or she will interpret a situation. Weick subscribed to Mead’s (1934) declaration that an individual is actually a “parliament of selves,” and each “self” or identity brings different preconceptions, mental maps, and emotional responses to interruptions or unusual events. Charmaz (1999) wrote “the self in process” is continually affected by experiences, interactions with other people, and social or cultural roles and norms. People learn which identity is appropriate for a certain situation through enactment of a proposed identity into the environment and feedback from said environment (Weick, 1995). In this way identities, much like the understanding produced through the sensemaking process, are established through social interaction.

The role of identity in sensemaking also embraces the notion of fluctuation. Weick (1995) stated, “depending on who I am, my definition of what is ‘out there’ will also change” (p. 20). Weick proposed that people will only see what they are prepared to see, and that a situation will be interpreted from the standpoint of the self that “feels most appropriate” for the context
(Weick, 1995). If understanding of the context changes, however, a person’s performed identity may change as well.

**Retrospective.** A “sensemaking recipe” common in almost all of Weick’s works (e.g. 1979, 1988, 1995, 2001; Weick et al., 2005) is “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” Not understanding until one sees the action of expressing an understanding may seem counterintuitive, but it carries the thought that sensemaking is a retrospective process. It is proposed that individuals frequently act first, then think about those actions and assign meaning to them (Anderson, 2006). On a broader level, sensemaking can be explained as a process where individuals or organizations try to understand previously lived experiences in light of their current situations (Becker, 1997; Bute & Jensen, 2011), with the goal of using these interpretations as guidance for future circumstances (Weick et al., 2005).

Life occurs in a continuous flow of experience (Chia, 2000). Discrete segments, such as specific named events, are pulled from the flux only when a person gives them his or her attention. In order for attention to create meaning of an event, the event must have already occurred (Weick, 1995). Because time and events will necessarily proceed forward while a person is directing his or her attention to a past event and creating a meaning for it, the present social, cognitive, and emotional environment of the sensemaker will influence the meaning attributed to past events (Schwartz, 1991; Weick, 1995). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) noted that as current projects and goals change, so too will the meaning of past events. Thus, the meaning attributed to an event can change over time, and will make a different kind of sense depending on
the current environment of the sensemaker (Weick, 1995). The equivocality of meaning for lapsed events can be clarified by the values and priorities of a sensemaker (Weick, 1995).

While this impact of the present on understanding of past events is frequently referred to as hindsight bias, Weick (2015) mentioned that for him, hindsight is “less a bias than normal functioning” (p. 191). Weick (1995) acknowledged that the retrospective nature of sensemaking allows for the past to be reconstructed with full knowledge of the outcome. Frequently this means a simplification of events, additional emphasis on actions that may have gone all but unnoticed in real time, and deeper analysis than was possible as events unfolded. This recollection is likely not completely reliable, but “may make for more effective action, even if it is lousy history” (Weick, 1995, p. 29).

**Social.** Sensemaking is inherently social. Weick proposed at the beginning of his book *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995) that sensemaking is the product of both individual and social activity, and questions whether a separation could even be made between the two. While sensemaking occurs at an organizational, group, and personal level, Weick (1995) warned that thinking of a sensemaker as singular is flawed logic. Sensemaking relies on language, social scripts, identity, and context, which are reliant on and influenced by the social environment of the sensemaker. Each individual acts and interacts within the parameters of his or her internalized and external social environment. Social groups have specific norms which create “an implicit framework of language, behavior, and symbols that connect members together in a group identity,” (Bird, 2007, p. 317), and these socially constructed frameworks frequently include stories and discourses accessed during the sensemaking process (Downman & Mills,
2008). These frameworks, or social scripts, are accepted or rejected based on their pertinence to the situation, and are key to interpreting and understating new situations.

Scripts held by a parent will influence how they perceive events, what action (if any) they choose, which goals they prioritize, and what language or imagery they call upon to help make sense of the situation. As an example, suppose a mother was raised and socialized in a very religious environment, and continues affiliation with that religion currently. When her child asks what death means, it likely the first recalled script will be a religious one. If she deems that script appropriate for the current situation and values how using that script has played out in the past, she will likely continue the tradition of using a religious explanation of death with her own child. As a contrast, if a parent was raised in a religious environment but intentionally does not identify as religious or uphold religious traditions, she will likely reject the religious script she was socialized to, and instead seek out or create a new script to relay to her child.

In addition to relying on socially-dependent words and symbols, schools of thought, and understandings of behavioral norms, sensemakers often interact intrapersonally with imagined or perceived others (Weick, 1995). Families are frequently comprised of more than just the parent-child dyad. Larger families are groups of interconnected, interdependent relationships that affect one another. Families provide specific role expectations for an individual, particular scripts associated with those roles, and provide emotional and informational support for its members. Even when important others are not physically present, people may imagine conversations of sensegiving and explanation playing out with an absent other, and adjust their own perceptions or interpretations based on the imagined responses of relevant others. In terms of relationship
conflict, Cloven and Roloff (1993) noted that sensemaking was done largely through mulling or internal interrogation of another in order to arrange thoughts and comprehend the conflict. Even monologues are contingent on an imagined audience, and thus internal communication during sensemaking should still be considered a social action (Weick, 1995).

Ongoing. While a starting point of the sensemaking process may be identifiable on paper in regards to a crisis or cosmology episode, sensemaking never truly “starts” (Weick, 1995). People exist within a continuous flow of events, noticed or otherwise, and are constantly “in the middle of” projects, events, and interpretation. Within this chaotic flux of potential starting points, people separate out, or bracket, specific events in time as indicators of important cues (Weick et al., 2005). When attention is given to specific cues that may seem irregular or extraordinary, people become aware of the sensemaking process retrospectively.

Just as there is no true “start” for the sensemaking process, there is no finite “stop.” Sensemaking is intended to introduce order and sense into an environment that has been changed somehow, but there is no guarantee the order will persist (Weick, 2006). Order and sense must be repeatedly reaccomplished with the addition and influence of new interpretations, actors, or cues. While one interpretation of events may seem plausible and “complete” in retrospect, any new development may require that interpretation to be evaluated again. Feedback from the environment and actors affects all parts of the sensemaking process, and ensures that any actions taken and meanings accepted are still valid given any newly arising information (Weick et al., 2005). The idea of sensemaking as “ongoing” is particularly germane with the inclusion of children in a scenario. As children grow, more complex understandings of previous and current
events are possible, which frequently results in revisited conversations about developing concepts.

**Extracted Cues.** Sensemaking is focused on and developed by extracted cues (Weick, 1995). Extracted cues point out an area of interest for the sensemaker, and also assist the sensemaker with developing an understanding of that event. The world before sensemaking begins is a “vast undifferentiated background” (Weick, 2006) from which a person must single out particular moments, define them, and begin to interpret those events while the world continues forward. This chaotic flux is full of potential moments, potential events, that can affect interpretation, influence proceedings, and possibly change entirely the resulting actions taken by the sensemaker (Weick et al., 2005).

The act of noticing, itself, works to define a cue as something noticeable, as an event worthy of attention. Examining what causes a person to realize the environment is different allows researchers to see the starting point of the conscious sensemaking process. Sensemaking is also focused by extracted cues. It is up to the sensemaker to determine which cues are important, why they are important, and what they could mean for the situation.

Context is essential to consider in the process of sensemaking. Context affects the actor-in-environment, what cues he or she is able and motivated to attend to, which scripts may be recalled and compared with initially, and even which meanings and interpretations of events are considered salient. Without understanding the context of an event or an individual, meanings of specific objects or interpretations can be equivocal and impede sensemaking and sensegiving
An equivocal cue can be interpreted in a number of ways, and the interpretation selected and acted upon by the sensemaker will affect the trajectory of the sensemaking process. **Plausibility.** As is expected with any interpretive process, sensemaking can lead to multiple assumptions about what is correct or true. Identity at the individual and organizational level is constantly in flux with the changing social context, which in turn influences what is labelled as a crisis, what cues are attended to, what actions are taken, and what interpretations are ascribed to the situations. There are infinite potentials for different interpretations of an event, and with no clear path to *The Truth*, plausibility becomes the ideal. Within the process of sensemaking, accuracy is nice, but not necessary (Weick, 1995). Pragmatism and instrumentality take precedence over logical reasoning and accurate definitions, which can postpone action during a time of crisis and generally “have the power to immobilize” individuals and organizations (Weick, 1995, p. 60). During the time spent ensuring interpretations and perceptions are “correct,” the situation is still evolving, and any hypothesis previously formed will be based on incomplete, perhaps outdated information (Coutu, 2003).

A vital characteristic of sensemaking is that it is meant to bring action (Weick et al., 2005) and overcome the tendency towards inertia that concerns of global accuracy invite (Weick, 1995). In our everyday world, decisions often need to be made quickly in order to return to the ongoing flow of normal life, and people are frequently faced with the choice between accuracy and speed (Fiske, 1992). The sensemaking process, generally, favors speedy action over delayed accuracy. Many times, action is required or taken before a complete, agreed upon meaning of the interruption can be formed. New inputs, or feedback, from the environment, can affect any stage
The sensemaking process. Any action—whether accurate or not—can lead to additional action and re-evaluation. Again, referencing the map metaphor, Sutcliffe (1994) stated, “having an accurate environmental map may be less important than having some map that brings order to the world and prompts action” (p. 1374). Weick noted that action is critical to recovering from a cosmology episode, where overwhelming emotions or panic can truly cause a breakdown in projects or daily functioning (Coutu, 2003). Once you begin to take action, using any old map, you can attune to new cues, rework interpretations, and get moving again in the right direction.

While accuracy may not be considered necessary in the sensemaking process, there are specific criteria that an adequate story or interpretation must include. A good story of what’s going on must be coherent, plausible and credible, embody past experience, allow for future embellishment, and be socially acceptable (Weick, 1995). As noted by Weick et al. (2005), sensemaking “…is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism” (p. 415). Sense is always being made, updated, and refined, and sensemaking should be constantly considered a work in progress (Downman & Mills, 2008).

In summary, sensemaking is a process that occurs without notice in everyday life. When unexpected events occur where there is no referent script, people become more conscious of the sensemaking process. People take their current environment into consideration, and compare their perceptions to related social scripts. If events seem similar to a previously successful social script, the script is likely to be utilized again. When there is no script that seems appropriate, people must work collaboratively with others in their environment to create a new script, to form
a new understanding, which explains events and will help successfully navigate the unexpected. While typically considered as part of literature on organizations, sensemaking easily applies to the family-as-organization. While this application takes sensemaking from a larger scale to a dyad or small group interaction, the overall process and characteristics remain unchanged.
There are multiple definitions of communication, and the definition a researcher adheres to will influence the approach to the academic field, as well as what he or she views as meaningful to study and how that study will be constructed. Based on Carey's (1989) cultural approach to communication, this research utilizes the definition of communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 23). Grounded theory relies on a symbolic interactionist approach, where "language is central to social life" (LaRossa, 2005, p. 838), and study of language as it relates to the social construction of reality is a worthwhile endeavor. Communication produces meaning, and the realities constructed through communication are both situated and negotiated (Charmaz, 2012).

The method adopts a relativist epistemology with the belief in the existence of multiple realities, and the primary goal is to gain an understanding of a research participant's constructed world and the meanings that are attributed to the varying aspects of that reality (Charmaz, 2012). The sensemaking framework identifies reality as “an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make sense of what occurs” (Weick, 1993, p. 635).

Constructivist grounded theory aims at creating an "account" of the communication participants within their social contexts, and includes the researcher as an "actor-in-context" (Bryant, 2002), with an active role in meaning construction and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher’s personal experiences, academic background, and preexisting assumptions influence his or her view of the project and what is valued in the data (Charmaz, 2012). As Bryant (2002) notes, constructivist grounded theory openly admits this and considers how the standpoints of
both researcher and participant affect interpretations by aiming for dialogue rather than assuming falsely-objective analysis. It is through the lens and the language of the researcher that the participants' realities are presented, and the method assumes ownership of responsibility and encourages reflexivity and transparency on the part of the researcher (Charmaz, 2006).

**Study Design**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data with the participants utilizing open-ended questions with additional probing questions for description or clarification when needed. Initial interview questions (Appendix D) served as a starting point for discussion, though the exact questions varied based on the conversational flow of the interview. Interview questions changed as analysis continued to fill in categories, gain clarification, and test fit for extant theories. The interview guide was structured around the initial aims of the research: understanding the goals and concerns of parents concerning death-education and how each are resolved and measured, what resources parents utilize to assist with both parent and child education on the subject, and understanding the actual process of parent-child communication about death within a specific socio-cultural context.

**Study Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to identify the twelve participants who contributed to the study. Participants were parents over the age of 18 with at least one child between the ages of 3
and 18, who had previously held a conversation with that child about death. Eleven mothers and one father participated. Eight participants indicated being a part of a two-parent household, including step-parents, unmarried partners, and boyfriends who assisted with parenting the children. Two mothers indicated sole parentage with no other parental involvement, and two participants indicated they had shared custody of the children, with the other parent holding primary custody.

Participants were not filtered out based on the type of loss experienced by the child, as the purpose of the research was to examine the communication about death with children, not specifically in the context of a personal loss in the family, or loss of a pet for example. Most participants spoke of more than one event that sparked conversations about death with their children. Five participants related stories of family pets dying, a sixth mentioned explanation of death starting when the child encountered the death of an animal that was not a personal pet. Six participants told of one or more grandparent dying as initiating conversations about death. Two participants mentioned that the death of family members prior to their children’s birth started the conversations about death, including an aunt and uncle for one group of children, and an older sister for another. One participant shared the story of her husband’s death, and the resulting conversations with her son. Four participants were made aware that an illness was terminal and had the opportunity to prepare their children prior to the death of a relative, and one participant mentioned serious injury preceding a death as the impetus for the conversation. One participant did not cite a death of a relative or pet as the beginning of his death-related conversations with his son, but instead media coverage of school shootings. With the broad range of experiences
shared by the participants, it would be inappropriate to assume any sort of generalizability to a larger population, but the stories shared do give insight into how parents make sense of an often difficult situation and share that understanding with their children. General demographic information is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Participant and Child Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name (Sex)</th>
<th>Shared Parentage</th>
<th>Primary Custody</th>
<th>Children’s Name (Sex)</th>
<th>Age @ Interview</th>
<th>Age @ First Incident</th>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Janice (F)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Henry (M)</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Alex (M)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>Michael (M)</td>
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Sampling

The purposive sampling for the study relied heavily on the social networks available to the researcher. The IRB-approved research flyer (Appendix C) was posted in coffee shops in the Orlando area, and posted electronically on Facebook multiple times over the course of the study. Recruitment relied heavily on word-of-mouth recruitment through academic and social networks.

The initial goal for the research project was to speak with 15-20 parents about their experiences, however I was only able to recruit twelve volunteers. While there were many people who qualified as participants on the grounds of having children, interview leads often did not result in interviews. I feel this is largely due to the topic of discussion, as there is a general reluctance to speak about death under typical circumstances in American culture, and a few participants who were comfortable sharing their experiences with me were not comfortable asking their friends to participate, as well. Two participants were hesitant to even repost the electronic flyer to their own social media accounts, indicating that the topic did not fit with how they wanted their accounts perceived.

Data Collection

A total of twelve interviews were conducted from June 2015 through June 2016. Interviews lasted roughly 60-90 minutes, and were conducted both in-person and over the phone for participant convenience. Face-to-face interviews were audio recorded using a handheld recorder, while phone interviews were recorded using Google Voice. Recordings were
transcribed either by the researcher or through transcription services provided through Rev.com and subsequently checked for accuracy. Any additional notes taken by hand during the interviews, or pertinent email communication permitted by the participants, were added to the transcriptions as notes and included in the analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis and data collection occur simultaneously in grounded theory research. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed as soon as possible after the interview to better inform the next interview in the study. Based off of Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory method, analysis began with open line-by-line coding to identify indicators (or words and phrases within the data which are analyzed), and name or label the possible meanings and implications of the participant's words and related actions. Line-by-line coding in the initial phase allows the analysis to adhere closely to the original data of the transcripts, and also allows the researcher to adapt the participant's own words or phrases for category codes. The grammar of the participant may be used as an in-vivo code if it is either profoundly descriptive or offers insight into the situation if rendered problematic in the interview and analysis (ex: a word that has common usage, but with possibly differing definitions based on the situation) (Charmaz, 2006). Line-by-line coding frequently resulted in additional questions about meaning and experiences that were incorporated into the following interviews.

Focused coding was used to judge the relevance and fit of concepts developed from the initial analysis. Significant or frequent concepts from the initial coding analysis were expanded
and refined using the researcher’s own interpretation and additional clarification from other participants. Focused coding created more abstract and directed codes than line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1978), and influenced the development of future research questions when a category was not complete with the current data collected.

Per LaRossa's (2005) simplification of the grounded theory method, axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used as the third specific type of analysis to investigate the categories and subcategories of an emergent theme and create a "framework" for the continuing analysis. Axial coding helps to rebuild the data into a coherent analysis, structuring categories into a working hierarchy and establishing the situational limitations of a category. Through axial coding, the researcher focuses on the conditions of the phenomena, the actions, and the consequences of those actions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding takes the "variables" developed during the open line-by-line coding and places them into relationships with each other to discern how (or if) they function together (LaRossa, 2005). The seminal authors of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss, disagree about the usage of axial coding, with Glaser preferring instead theoretical coding (also supported by Charmaz, 2006). The two types of coding both serve the purpose of situating focal concepts within a larger picture to begin the development of workable hypotheses and theories (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding was selected in the place of theoretical coding because the researcher selects one focal variable to serve as the implied "axis" of the analysis, and maps the other variables in relation to the focal variable.

The "constant comparative method" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or "concept-indicator model" (Glaser, 1978) was used throughout all stages of the data analysis to group like
categories together, or to distinguish among categories. The indicator was compared and contrasted with other indicators which had already "earned" their place in the category (LaRossa, 2005). Comparisons were made within interview data sets and among them when appropriate to further fill out the emerging categories.

For clarification purposes, the below example demonstrates the coding process applied to a mother’s description of her son’s reaction to a family death:

My uncle had passed away and it freaked him out. He was about 3 or 4. It really freaked him out. And um, I said that people don't die until they're ready. And he was ready. And that seemed to make him feel a lot better. (Line 51).

The line-by-line coding for this segment simply restated the participant’s words, with additional questions from the researcher added in as notes. Focused coding brought attention to the function of the explanation offered within the related circumstance. Linda indicated her son’s emotional state was anxious or “freaked out” by the death of his great-uncle. Linda believes her explanation calmed her son, made him feel better, because her uncle was okay with his own death and ready to die. Axial coding led to this explanation from the participant that “people don’t die until they’re ready” and the implication of agency for the deceased, being contrasted with participants who had to explain a sudden death or unexpected information about a terminal illness. While this participant was the only person to use this exact phrasing, similar themes arose from experiences of parents who only had practice with death of the very sick or elderly to explain to their children.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Sensemaking

To start the presentation of data, I will take instruction from Weick’s (1995) caution that frequently researchers become so preoccupied with the “process imagery” of the sensemaking perspective that they fail to report what is actually being processed (p. 108). Sensemaking is practically a question of “same or different,” and that question and evaluation will be presented first from the data. The information processed by a sensemaker is some cue from their current environment, which is then compared to some frame of reference from their personal history or general socialization. The question of “same or different” then establishes the relationship between the current cue and the past reference or social script. The situation can be evaluated as “same,” in which case action will follow the same pattern as the script demands, or “different” and the reference script is rejected and a new script is sought.

As shown in Table 2 below, the participants and their families each had different experiences with death. Some had experienced a death in the family years prior and related their experiences with general death education, and at times specific information about those who had previously passed away. Others were coping with a recent death. Many times, this was the death of a close family member, and parents explained how they either prepared their child for, or helped their child react to, such a loss. And still others were working on more abstract aspects of death and loss with their children, without a personal example of death for their children to relate the conversation to. The current events, coupled with recalled scripts or past frames of reference, are considered together by the sensemaker during the creation of meaning, and therefore will be
presented together here. Additionally, the impact of specific characteristics of sensemaking, and the messages relayed in the sensegiving process, will be presented.

Table 2: Family Experiences with Death

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pet Death</th>
<th>Family Death</th>
<th>Expected Death</th>
<th>Acquaintance Death</th>
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<td>Diane</td>
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<td>Stephanie</td>
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**No frame of reference.** Two participants, Annie and Marcy mentioned when they were faced with the task of understanding the death of their own parents and explaining the situation to their children, they could not recall conversations about death, or any prior experiences with death that they could use as a reference point. This lack of experience, or inability to recall any actual experience, led to feelings of acting instinctually without a clear plan. Annie specifically said:

Um, it’s weird, I went like my entire life as a child. Up until my late 20's, and then all the sudden I'm like faced with death, at like, all around. (Line 542)
When faced with her father’s terminal diagnosis, she explained the situation to her eight-year-old son in terms of sickness and with honesty about her own uncertainty with what happens after death. When talking about the experience, she recalled feeling like she was “winging it” at the time (Line 1442). In subsequent conversations with her children, she referenced what was discussed in that initial conversation with Adam, using the experience with their grandfather as the new reference point for the family.

Marcy remembered family members dying when she was younger, but felt that she was excluded from the conversations. She mentioned her parents did not talk to her about death, and therefore had no reference point when she had to act as the parent in a similar situation. She recalled her parents informing her of a death in the family, leaving for the funeral, and not discussing matters more than that.

I really, I don't remember them saying much. I think they really tried to shield me. (Line 12)

I don't remember my parents really coming home and crying. I don't remember. It was just like, go on. I don't really at any point remember seeing them grieve, where I'm not that person. (Line 585)

When her own mother died suddenly, she tried to replicate how her own parents treated death with her own children, then 2 and 5 years old, by avoiding conversation with the intention of “shielding” children from death. She admitted she wasn’t consciously making the decision to leave the children out of the grieving process, but was instead acting based on “gut” instinct.
I really don't remember any dialogue. The first time I tried to do the same thing. I shielded them a little bit. (Line 54)

I just feel like that was all I knew. That's what they had done to me when I was little. They kept me away and shielded me. (Line 581)

After evaluating her children’s response to the loss of their grandmother, Marcy changed her actions when her father died roughly a year later. In this second instance of sensemaking, Marcy compared the situation (death of her father) with the point of reference created from her mother’s death, and decided similar action would not be appropriate.

I felt like whatever we did, it didn't necessarily seem to… we didn't get the response we were hoping for. ‘We'll be okay. They're going to be okay.’ We shielded them from it. They still hurt. (Line 589)

Especially Jacob, just watching Jacob go through what he went through and his whole process, I couldn't do that to him again. I just felt like he was going through it whether he was there or not. I think maybe him having to go through and explain, it was better, because then he had an understanding rather than one day, somebody's here. The next day, they're gone. (Line 593).

It is probable that both women previously had some sort of talk about death in their histories, whether with parents or other members of the community. What is notable here, however, was their perception that there was no true dialogue or event that would have caused death to be a topic of conversation. Without a script readily available to compare present events with, the participants reported less surety with in their actions and explanations.
Continued tradition. Most participants could easily recall a situation from their past that warranted discussion about death with their parents. The most commonly continued tradition or script relating to the explanation of death was the incorporation of some idea of an afterlife.

Michelle recalled an experience with the death of a young friend at age seven where her father spoke of her friend passing away, and being in heaven. Because of her religious upbringing, she found the idea of her friend in heaven comforting, and chose to continue the tradition of focusing conversations about death on an afterlife in heaven.

*Interviewer: So when you're trying to talk about death, what do you normally say? That they're in heaven?*

Michelle: They're up in heaven. I don't even like to say they've died unless I absolutely have to like, get to the point right away. I like to just say they're up in heaven or something.

*Interviewer: Because she understands what that means already?*

Michelle: Yeah and I think it's just a softer answer. (Line 298)

Michelle’s adoption of a continued tradition was described as being so thoroughly embraced that she used it almost as a complete substitution to discussions of death.

Other parents referenced heaven, but distinguished it from a religious belief. Renee used imagery of heaven and the reunion with relatives after death when explaining the death of her brother and sister-in-law to her older children. Renee was raised in a very religious household, with her father practicing as a pastor for many years. In her interview, however, she distinguished the belief in heaven from her religious views.
I definitely did bring up the whole ‘he's in a better place, she's in a better place. She can never get hurt again, he can never get hurt again.’ Have it be like the heaven aspect of it. Even though I'm a Christian and I believe we go to heaven, I don't ... That's something completely different. I don't want to press my views and my beliefs so forcefully on my kids to where they might reject it because mom's like super hard-core with it. Like how our parents were, but, it was just ... I did definitely bring that up. (Line 147)

Jackson also commented that his explanation of heaven may not be completely the same as his Christian view of heaven. While he did not recall a specific conversation about death that incorporated heaven from his own history, he mentioned he was raised Christian and frequently “picked up” on things that may not have been explicitly mentioned by his mother.

And you know I’ve told him before that people die and they go on to heaven or, I didn't ever really say hell, I don't think I ever really talked to him about the difference in our Christian belief in death. So I think I've always said kind of like heaven. (Line 28)

Meg indicated a personal history with a Christian religion, but mentioned that her usage of heaven was not religious for her family. The idea of heaven was more of a comforting message rather than referencing any religious ideology.

It’s not really religious for us, I think it's just... I just, it's calming I guess. It's just kind of, I have no idea what I believe, like I don't know if I believe in heaven or whatever. (Line 401)
Heaven was a very common addition to discussions of death for my participants, whether religious or non-religious in their own definitions. For those who identified as religious, mentioning heaven within the death conversation continued traditions they were raised with and imparted important religious beliefs to their children. Both religious and non-religious parents mentioned referencing heaven as a message of hope for their children, providing some comfort that the deceased are in a better place, no longer in pain on earth, and that there is the possibility of reunion with them after death.

The parents who indicated their discussion of death incorporated discussion about heaven, whether a religious heaven, or in line with a general cultural view of heaven, did not indicate that their children had any questions about what heaven was, or what it meant. Frequently parents would indicate heaven was a place for reunion with other deceased relatives, many included pets in heaven, and some indicated heaven was specifically related to God or Jesus. Parents who continued the tradition of associating conversations about death with conversations about heaven appeared to be relying on the previous socialization of their children in religious or secular cultures that include an idea of heaven. The script of heaven, afterlife, and in some cases reunion was readily available to these parents, and while they did not mention feelings of confidence or uncertainty over its use, many who mentioned heaven noted its comforting or calming purpose for their children. Because the children already shared the script of heaven and what that means to the family, simply stating “she’s in heaven now” indicated to the children more or less that the person had died, her consciousness or soul was in heaven, she physically was no longer in pain, and was reunited with other relatives or pets.
Rejected scripts. Not all parents believed the notion of heaven, whether religiously or culturally defined, was the best script of action to use when discussing death with their children. Three participants mentioned consciously avoiding the inclusion of heaven in their conversations. Linda mentioned a childhood with a religious upbringing, but decided with her husband before her children were born that they would not continue that tradition.

As an adult, I'd say I'm more agnostic, leaning towards atheist more than anything, and I feel that a lot of those comforting messages, especially the ones that imply religiosity, um, aren't...I think they just placate rather than actually do something. (Line 93)

And I think that's what I'm always afraid of, is that religion is used as ritual and routine, and then prevents us from actually thinking about answers. And I didn't want my children to have that and then have like I did, that realization afterwards, wait a minute...this isn't an answer, this is just something that's putting you off. To have to think about it. (Line 112)

Critical thinking, reflection on their own mortality, and education and acceptance of alternate beliefs were very important to Linda. It is important to note that Linda’s children were much older at the time of interview than the other participants (two youngest children were 17), which likely results in goals that differ significantly from parents explaining death to a toddler for the first time.

Diane and Amanda both tried to discuss death with their young children while avoiding the inclusion of heaven. Both women indicated difficulty knowing how to act or what to say to
their children, since they rejected the script of heaven they were experienced with and socialized to. Diane, whose daughter was three at the time, explained the death of her own mother without referencing heaven. Days later, someone outside the family told Lily that her grandmother was in heaven watching her, and Lily to this day has accepted that understanding of an afterlife, despite her mother’s objections.

I am an atheist, I thought it was important to teach her, not do to the heaven thing with her. But I didn't really know how to talk about death with her. (Diane, Line 92)

Diane explained that her grandmother had died, that she would be missed, but Lily and her moms could always remember the good memories they had with her, and Diane felt comfortable leaving the conversation at that.

So then about, I don't know, a week later, she came home from the babysitter’s house and told me that grandma was in heaven. And grandma could see us. And was watching us and would always be watching us, and grandma would see everything we do. (Line 108)

She expressed mixed emotions about her daughter, now five, learning about heaven and believing in a continued existence after death without her input. While she acknowledged that the idea of heaven is very common within American culture, and supports the right that others have to believe what they want, she expressed a similar concern as Linda did, that in the context of death and grief, heaven is an instinctive comforting reaction rather than an expression of religious faith.
So language around death, we have a culture, I don't even think it's so much religious anymore. I think it's how we comfort each other culturally. Because I've hear it from too many people who...who haven't seen the inside of a church in decades. (Line 175)

I feel very comfortable telling my kids that my mother is dead, and that I miss my mother, and that's it. I don't feel at all uncomfortable with that conceptually, but I can't fight a culture. Honestly, it's an entire culture. (Line 301)

Diane tried to reject what she considered a culturally dominant script. She specifically tried to avoid talk of heaven when explaining the death of her mother to Lily, but mentioned she had little idea what to mention in its place. She decided on an explanation she was comfortable with that did not include religious implications or talk of an afterlife, in line with her own personal values. However, Lily was told of heaven by someone outside her family, who mentioned it as part of the comforting messages Diane feels are so ingrained with religious imagery. While Diane did not initially intend to incorporate heaven in talks of death with her children, she feels like she cannot “fight” a culture and its dominant scripts, and allows Lily to believe what she would like.

Amanda and her husband were both raised in families she considered very religious, and had explicitly decided to start their own family as a “secular” family. When they were made aware of his father’s terminal diagnosis, they actively sought guidance and outside resources for how to explain death to their three-year-old daughter in accordance with their own values of secular parenting and science-based Montessori philosophy.
We just, well, the way we raise our kids is completely different to how we were raised. (Line 597)

So we don't evoke any ideas of heaven or afterlife. We're very careful with our wording of things. (Line 75)

And (we) wanted her to understand a lot about nature, and have firsthand experience with it, and, um ... Like have an appreciation for where she fits in to the universe and the world. (Line 137)

Amanda and her husband eventually found a resource they both agreed upon, a children’s picture book called *Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie. They adopted the language used in the book’s explanation, that all things die because they become so sick or so hurt that they cannot get better, and that this is part of the natural lifecycle of every living thing. Amanda noted she and her husband are very consistent in using the exact phrasing from the book, and even ask those watching their daughter to do the same.

I would tell my aunt, like, oh by the way we're talking about death now, so if she wants to read that book, just read the book, don't, don't elaborate. (Line 878)

She believes that by being consistent with their wording around death, Sofia will be able to build on her understanding of the concept each time she encounters a death. The parents have already used the same explanation in reference to her grandfather’s death, the death of snails and beetles found on walks, and even to explain why the dinosaurs died. Amanda and her husband are happy with the verbiage from the book and believe it will help Sofia transition to more complex understandings when she is older.
Parents who rejected what they perceived as a dominant script (including talk of heaven or an afterlife in conversations about death) had to actively work on a new script. Amanda was able to find a script she and her husband accepted from outside resources, Linda presented the concept of heaven along with various other religious beliefs of life after death (like reincarnation), and Diane created a script for her daughter that was ultimately rejected in preference of the dominant script of heaven. All three women justified their rejection of the heaven script in the interviews, and two mentioned efforts made to actively protect against the adoption of that script in their families, either through careful selection and adherence to a preferred message (Amanda), or through conversation with children and outside others (Diane).

**Influential characteristics.** As can be seen from the few excerpts above, there are many possible influences on the sensemaking process. Of note here are a few of the characteristics of sensemaking, specifically that it is social in nature and concerns socialization, grounded in and influenced by identity construction, an ongoing process, and values plausibility and speed over accuracy.

**Social.** Many parents indicated the importance of support from outside the immediate family for both their own personal grieving process, as well as assistance with the sensemaking and sensegiving processes.

Ariana mentioned support from both her family and professionals at the hospital and through hospice care regarding how to help her son through the experience of his father’s accident and death by providing advice and reading materials. While she did not find the
pamphlets very helpful or take advice from them, the feeling that she was not alone while processing her husband’s death and helping her son through it was very valuable.

Annie also appreciated assistance from a relative of her neighbor when she learned of her father’s terminal cancer diagnosis a few years back, and again when the family lost multiple pets.

The nice thing is my ‘sometimes’ next door neighbor. Because she comes and stays with her sister, she actually works with Hospice back home in Minnesota. And so whenever I found out, I called her up immediately, and she came. And I was just crying to her and she was just so supportive. (Line 1028)

Annie considered her neighbor a source of both emotional comfort for her as a daughter, and a source of sound advice as her neighbor dealt with death on a regular basis through her professional work.

Amanda appreciated both support and information from her online Montessori network when looking for alternate ways to explain death to her daughter. She mentioned that now, almost every month, a new person asks for information on how to explain death to their young children. She has offered information on how she explained death to Sofia to the community, and has even suggested reading materials for a local community center to help other parents she may not have direct contact with.

In addition to the supportive role many participants reported of others, a few participants indicated they had, or would, ask trusted others directly if they were not able to adequately frame an understanding for their children. Stephanie indicated that while she has not yet encountered a death-related question she did not feel prepared to answer, her mother-in-law would be someone
she would look to for guidance, partly because of her close involvement with the family, and also because of her own strong religious faith.

I would have no problem saying, ‘You know what, you should go ask grandma. That's a great question. Let's go ask her together.’ That would be fine. I think it does take a village and sometimes parents don't have the best answers. (Line 513)

Michelle has already utilized her daughter’s Sunday School teacher, Miss Anna, as an outside resource when her daughter Janice had questions she did not know the answer to, or wanted a second opinion on. Michelle indicated Miss Anna is a mother herself, studied theology in graduate school, and shares a similar approach to parenting. She feels very comfortable with Janice asking people outside of her parents difficult questions.

I hope she wants to talk to other people, I think it's a good kind of village with her, we have a lot of positive influences thank goodness, and we're lucky and fortunate to have other people that she trusts and I hope she wants to talk to other people about it because I certainly don't expect her to just talk to me and her dad only. (Line 209)

Stephanie had not yet included an outside other in the death-related conversations with her children, but was prepared to include her mother-in-law if the need arose. Michelle had previously reached out to Miss Anna, the Sunday School teacher, for questions Janice had about their faith, and felt she could certainly ask Miss Anna to help with Janice’s questions on death. These two mothers appeared to have people previously selected to support them in their roles as
death educators if needed, and had already considered who they would trust to assist with the conversations.

Participants who supported the idea of involving others outside of their immediate family in the conversation mentioned those who they felt shared their referenced script. Stephanie mentioned her mother-in-law, who raised and socialized her husband (who shared the same views on religion as Stephanie), Michelle mentioned the Sunday School teacher Miss Anna who shares her religious beliefs as well as approach to parenting, and Diane and Linda (not excerpted here) both mentioned people in their social networks who share their own beliefs would be welcomed into the conversation if they, for some reason, could not answer their children’s questions. To the participants in this study, consistent use of the same script was valued, even if information came from people other than the parents.

Some participants relayed opinions and evaluations of the general attitude towards death and grief in America in their interviews, specifically the limitations American culture puts on emotional displays surrounding death and the grieving process. Diane indicated she felt trapped within the American expectations of grief and mourning, and did not feel comfortable limiting her children in the same way.

I think that is an American thing, too. To grit your teeth and push your way through your pain and keep moving forward, and show your kids they can do that, too. They can be strong and that’s it. … I think if you could get people to acknowledge how painful death is, and how painful mourning is and how painful
grieving is, they will follow it up with ‘Yeah but you’ve just got to muscle through. You’ve got to get back to work, you’ve got to blah blah blah.’ (Line 606)

Linda also relayed how her family of origin acted when there was a close death.

They're very formal, there's not a lot of emotion that goes with it. And so you go to church, you shed maybe a tear, one, and before you leave make sure you wipe it off and make sure you've got the stiff upper lip. (Line 873)

Both Linda and Diane spoke of the cultural requirement of emotional control in the face of grief in disparaging terms. To them, this approach was not supportive of those grieving, and was a detrimental message they did not wish to pass along to their children.

Other participants did not speak directly of culture, or the “stiff upper lip” that Diane and Linda felt was imposed upon them, but appear to have internalized the cultural requirement of emotional control in the face of death and relate it to strength in their own telling. Angela admitted she feels death can be difficult to discuss, in part because of the need to “be strong for your child.”

I mean I think death is a hard conversation to have with a child because you know during that time that you're having the conversation you have to put your emotions aside, and have that conversation because you want to be strong for your child. And so that in itself is difficult. (Line 456)

Angela, who spoke with her son about the death of the family dog, but not yet of a family member, felt parents should not let their own emotional responses to the death interfere with the
conversation. Other participants who had experienced the death of close family members mentioned the inclusion of their own emotions was intentional in their conversations, and beneficial to their children. It is likely different types of death call to mind different social scripts with expectations for emotional expression.

**Identity.** Issues of role and identity frequently appeared in interview conversations with parents explaining the death of a close relation. The majority of participants I spoke with were mothers who had the task of helping their child understand death and what that meant within the context of his or her life, but also mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives who had lost someone close.

As the most common close relation death that occurred among participants was the death of a mother or father, there are more stories of participants switching between the role of mother and daughter than others. Diane explains a sort of conflict between the two roles at her mother’s wake.

But I did not bring Lily to my mother's wake when she was 3.5 largely because I...I was so emotional, um, I wanted to be able to talk to her and... and make her make her not afraid and make her feel safe and taken care of and all that. And I would have been doing just only that through the whole wake. And I had to talk to you know 500 people, so, it wasn't going to be practical. (Line 517)

For Diane, the social duties expected of the children of the deceased and concerns of appropriately performing those duties while also comforting and taking care of her daughter conflicted.
Annie also mentioned the difficulty she had with changing roles during the death of her father. As a daughter, she wanted an opportunity to grieve his death, but as a mother she felt she wasn’t immediately afforded that opportunity because she needed to be present for her son, to help him through his own grief, and for her mother who had just lost her spouse.

There comes a point where I think, like, I was being so strong for so long. It's like, well, when am I going to get to grieve too? You know what I mean? (Line 1093)

I mean I've had my moments (to grieve). But, I mean at the time, at that time, having to be the strong person for everybody who was around me. Especially my child, you know, I couldn't fall apart in front of him. I had to be there to support him, so. (Line 1096)

Annie’s conflict arose less from outside expectation of social duties or functions relatives need to perform at funeral services, and more from her own emotional needs. She, as a daughter, felt the need to grieve her father. Her other family roles, like mother to Adam and daughter to her own grieving mother, left her pushing aside her own need to grieve in order to be the “strong one” for her family and support them in their own time of grief.

These feelings of role conflict added additional emotional distress to the grieving process. Marcy, who lost her mother suddenly, and her father a year later, felt her experience of grief as a daughter overrode her role as a mother after the first death. She related feelings of guilt that she was not as present for her children as she felt she should have been, and believes it was a detriment to her children. Consequently, when her father died, Marcy refused to grieve him as a
daughter, worried that she would again feel so consumed by her grief that her children would feel she was absent from them.

It was just like one day I looked at him and I said, ‘Oh my God, you're screwing them up really bad, Marcy. You need to stop because you're reflecting ...’ It was really, I mean, it was bad. I really, really believe that they had lost me. It was like I remember looking at Jacob, and I remember saying, ”Oh my God, you just ... it's not about you anymore, Marcy. It's not about you. It's about them. You need to be there for them because they haven't had you. (Line 833)

Even though she was grieving the loss of a parent, Marcy felt that at some point it “wasn’t about her,” anymore, and she re-prioritized her role as mother over her role as daughter. This positioning of roles, motivated by her fear of being absent as a mother again, limited her own grief for her father.

I barely cried for my dad. Maybe it was because I was afraid that it would just... it would just start over. … I remember going, ‘You can't cry.’ I remember. It was just different. (Line 775)

Marcy’s perception of her previous failure in role prioritization led her to act almost exclusively in the role of mother after her father’s death, limiting her ability to fully grieve the loss. The participants who mentioned the conflict between roles of daughter and mother sometimes achieved a balance between their need to grieve their parent and their need as a mother to be present or “the strong one” for their children, but many felt, regardless of the extent of their grief,
that acting in the role of daughter would be done at the expense of their children. Placing one’s own need to grieve first was not evaluated as suitable when it conflicted with a parental role.

Parents also mentioned acting as educators, using their own grief as an instructional resource for their children, especially as it related to expression of emotions. Many parents explicitly stated in their accounts that it was okay to be sad, that they shared their own feelings with their children and encouraged their children to express their emotions, as well.

Diane, who believes very strongly in educating her children about grief as well as death, mentioned multiple stories of interacting with her children and explaining her own sadness at the loss of her mother.

Because I guess I was very, very teary for a year. So I was often crying, I would often talk to her about how it’s okay you know, to cry and to be sad. And you can be sad at the same time you’re happy. Because every time anything made me happy I would cry because my mother wasn't there to see it. So I had to constantly explain to them you know that you can have two emotions out once, and so we did. (Line 110)

Diane felt it was important that her children understand emotional responses to grief, including more complicated feelings of mixed emotion, and shared her feelings openly with them. Stephanie also mentioned explaining the experience of being happy and sad at the same time when visiting the gravesite of her daughter with her living sons.

They have never seen me… well, they have a couple of times. There have been a couple of times when I've cried at the gravesite. I actually don't do it very often
anymore. My oldest is very in tune. ‘Mommy, why are you crying?’ ‘Oh, it's because I'm happy and I'm remembering a happy memory.’ (Line 627)

As mentioned previously, other participants implied they were not as comfortable with emotional displays in front of their children, and frequently related emotional control on the part of the parent with strength and protection of the child.

In addition to conflict between family roles and the emotional goal of the educator, parents mentioned tension between their desire to remain honest with their children as educators, even when faced with their own uncertainty surrounding death, and the need to be a source of comfort for their children. When questioned about what happens after death, Annie was honest with her son. She shared her hope that there is something wonderful after death, but admitted that she was not certain.

I think it’s really important to be honest. Um, at least where it came with me, the questions about well, where do we go after this. My answer to him was I really, I don't know. (Line 1104)

It's like a touchy thing because you want to protect your child, you know. But at the same time you need to be honest. It’s kind of like, it’s like you know that by being honest you’re going to be hurt, you know, so it's kind of like, oooooh, balancing act here. I just, to, feel like with Adam, like, I was as honest as I could be, you know hey you know he's sick and we don't have much time with him. So we've got to make the most we can out of the time we have with him. (Line 113)
Annie felt the need to act as Adam’s protector, but also felt it was important to be honest with him about death and her thoughts on an afterlife. Parents who utilized the heaven script mentioned previously associated it with a comforting message of hope, but Annie did not personally agree with the implications of a heaven, and prioritized openness and honesty in conversation with her son, even though she realized doing so may cause him some emotional pain.

Renee expressed the desire to be honest with her children, up to a point. When providing her older sons with details of her brother’s death by suicide for the first time, she wanted to be honest and open with them, but felt the need for “kid gloves” due to the nature of his death.

I was trying to at first ... When they ask you, when they were asking me questions, a whole bunch of things ... The mom filter totally goes into over-gear.

(Line 204)

She initially tried to be as honest as possible, and provide them specific answers to their questions. Once the conversation started, she felt the questions they were asking either had answers she could not explain (ex: ‘Well why did he do it?’) or focused too much on the sensational aspect of his death, rather than what she was trying to inform them about, which was his history with mental illness.

Renee’s unique experience with this conversation calls on many different roles discussed. As a mother and educator, she wanted to inform her sons about their uncle, how he died, and caution them about mental illnesses common in their family history, and how to communicate concerns about mental well-being. She wanted to be an honest educator to her children, giving
them details on his death and her believed understanding of why, and a protector with a strong
“mom filter” against the sensational aspects of his death they became interested in that may be
difficult for children to understand. Within the one conversation, Renee fluctuated between
multiple roles, and eventually her need to protect her children and “mom filter” won out, and
stopped the conversation that she felt had gone off goal. She did mention that she will revisit the
conversation with her older sons when she finds a way to explain it that is “appropriate,” but
likely will not approach the conversation in the same way with her young daughter in the future.

The various aspects of identity displayed by a parent, whether it be the “strong one,” an
educator, protector, or a familial role, affects their interpretation of what is appropriate behavior
and what their goals are for conversation. If two aspects of a parents’ identity are in conflict,
parents face the difficult decision of prioritizing one role at the possible expense of the needs of
other roles.

Ongoing. Many parents agreed that the conversation surrounding death was an ongoing
practice. Both the context and content of conversations will change with time, and while some
parents expressed hesitation at the idea of initiating the conversation outside of a life event, many
see the need to revisit their children’s understanding of death as they grow. Many parents with
younger children indicated that there was not a complete understanding of death yet, and had the
intention of revisiting the conversation as the children grew.

There, there are aspects of life and death that we want Sofia to understand but we
know that she doesn’t understand them now. (Amanda, Line 1323)
Parents mentioned a few misconceptions or grey areas they planned to revisit with their children as they matured, including the idea that people only die when they are very old, that people only die when they are very sick, and that being underground/below the horizon or conversely in the sky does not equate with being dead.

**Plausibility.** During conversation, an immediate response that is credible, plausible, and allows for future embellishment is more pragmatic than waiting to respond until a complete, fully accurate message can be constructed. Multiple participants indicated agreement with the idea that plausibility is more important than accuracy with the sensemaking process, and detailed how the nature of the parent-child relationship can be forgiving of error and invites future elaboration on previous discussion. Stephanie explained that with her younger children aged six and four, any answer does not always have to be your final answer.

You wonder, ‘Did I explain that right? Maybe I should ...’ The good thing about kids is that they're very forgiving. If you do explain it wrong the first time, you can always circle back and re-explain it and they're okay with that. (Line 290)

Annie also acknowledges that many of her discussions with her children are forgiving.

Well, it really is, it's kind of trial and error. I think it its trial and error with a lot of things. (Line 1379)

Annie also noted with some humor that her oldest son, now twelve, has picked up on her habit of “trial and error” within the family, and feels that his younger siblings benefit from the “trial runs” between him and his mother.
And Adam he says, you know, it's funny. He's like, I hate having to be your guinea pig. You're going to learn everything on me, so that you know what to do with them. (Line 945)

Stephanie and Annie mentioned conversations are continually edited, updated, and clarified with their children, specifically complicated concepts like the lifecycle and death. The first conversation on death isn’t the only conversation, and neither felt anxiety at the start of their conversations on death because they accepted that understanding is a continual process and they did not need to have the “right” answer immediately. Conversations that satisfy the immediate needs of the situation can be added to or clarified together in future talks to develop a more accurate understanding of the meaning of death.

Jackson, the only father who participated, had a different view of the experimentation mentioned by the other participants. Unlike how Stephanie and Annie present concerns over accuracy, where the nature of the relationship between child and parent allows some leeway and review, Jackson indicated that parents cannot hesitate or appear puzzled over a question because it adds a connotation to the conversation that the topic is hard, confusing, or inappropriate.

It's because he's nine, I know that he's going to ask shocking things and, you know, you've got to keep going. You pause and it's like sharks to blood, they can smell it. Like ‘Oh, he paused, I got him!’ It’s best to just like, be as quick as possible. Just say something random-like. Then you can go ‘You know what, I confused that, I'm sorry.’ (Line 437)
He admitted when his son mentioned his own fears and nightmares of being involved in a shooting, he was stumped and felt unsteady in the conversation because he had no indication that his son knew about the school shootings around the country, much less thought about them enough to fear for his own life in such a situation. He felt the need to control his own emotions and reactions during the conversation so as to not send any unintended messages.

**Sensegiving**

While there were a multitude of scenarios shared in the twelve interviews, each with their own specific context, there were four overarching themes parents relayed to their children through the sensegiving process: understanding cause of death, situating this death socially and historically, keeping memories of the deceased active for children, and if it is better to wait for a death to occur to talk to a child, or prepare them ahead of time with conversations about death. Many participants recalled some sort of explicit talk on the themes, while others indicated through their stories an implicit agreement with the themes.

**Causality.** The first theme involved parents explaining why people (and pets) die. Parents of younger children often indicated during their comforting messages that people do not die unless they are very old or very sick as a response to children wondering about their own deaths or the possible deaths of their parents. The complexity and perceived appropriateness of this message changed with the age of the children involved. Diane wanted her children to know that their grandmother died because she was very sick.
I just told her, she died, and… That she was very, very sick, I remember thinking it was important that Lily understand that, you know, at her age. My mother was very, very sick, and it was the kind of sickness that doctors can't cure. But she knew… She knew that she was safe and that I was safe so she wasn't really concerned actually. I remember being prepared for that, but she wasn't concerned at that point.

(Line 82)

Diane predicted her daughter Lily, who was three when they had their initial conversation about death, would have fears of her own safety at the knowledge that people die. Diane recalled in the interview fearing the death of her own parents as a young child, and planned a way to mitigate these fears for Lily by explicitly explaining the cause of her grandmother’s death as an extreme sickness that doctors could not cure. Diane indicated that Lily did not exhibit any of the concerns she prepared for after their conversation.

Amanda, who specifically sought out age-appropriate wording for her three-year-old daughter, decided on a message universal to animals, plants, and humans alike in congruence with the family’s belief in connecting with nature and the universe. The verbiage used with extreme consistency was that anything will die if it gets “too sick, or too hurt” and cannot get better. Despite the age-neutral message, Amanda mentioned that Sofia still thinks her grandfather died because he was elderly, not from cancer.

She, she has this phrase in her head that like, you know everyone dies, she knows that now. But she thinks, like everyone, unless something horrible happens to you, you die when you're much older. And she keeps saying like, ‘Grandpa was very
old.’ But like, honestly, in an adult, an adult conversation, he wasn't that old. You know, when my daughter's in the room we're like, ’Yes, Grandpa was old.’ But he really wasn't that old. He had a brain tumor that there was nothing you could do. Like that could hit a twenty-year-old, it's still going to kill you, um, but, for her in her head, she's just like, ‘Yeah because, you know, everyone dies when they're really old.’ And we're like, that's fine for you to understand now.” (Line 334)

Amanda intended her messages about death to be simple, but encompass a baseline understanding for many situations. Her intended message that everything dies when it becomes too sick or too injured was accepted by Sofia generally, but Sofia attributes the death of her grandfather to old age instead of his illness. Amanda accepts Sofia’s reasoning “for now,” but intends to revisit her understanding of causality in the future, to ensure Sofia’s understanding of death incorporates death at any age, not just death of the elderly.

Parents of older children, like Linda and Meg, were operating beyond the purpose of reassuring, the primary concern of parents with younger children, and were instead working towards a more complete understanding of inevitability and causality of death with their children. Linda, whose youngest children were seventeen at the time of interview, mentioned discussing a recent news story with her children about a teenager and his terminal illness, and the emotional concerns that arose for her daughter.

We all expect that old people can die, we never expect that younger people will.

(Line 549)
By introducing her children to stories of terminal illness or death of younger people, Linda reinforced her older children’s expected understanding that people can die at any age. Meg, the mother of three young teenagers, had learned the day before the interview of a death within the children’s social network, of a young girl they had spent the previous Halloween with and occasionally met with their babysitter.

And I mean I think them hearing about her, I think it will be a bit of a wake up that we do know that things can happen to them. So yeah I think with them, it's more a... going to be more of like, kind of, depending on how they, how they react and what questions they may have, um. I mean it is different when a child dies from an illness or an accident or something, rather than an older person. (Line 287)

Both of these situations present sensemaking and sensegiving opportunities slightly different from others participants mentioned. In these circumstances, parents chose intentionally to initiate conversations on death with their children that could be viewed as optional. While the child mentioned in Meg’s interview was a part of her children’s larger social network, her children did not have a close relationship with her and likely would have only heard about the death from their babysitter. Linda sought out a news story with the intention of education for her children. Both mothers felt it was important to ensure their children understand that people can die at any age, not just the elderly, and sought out or presented information to them about people who had died within their own age cohort to initiate the conversation.

Parents of young children, who were concerned with basic-level understanding of why a person died and the emotional stability of their children, frequently mentioned a person or pet
died because they were very old or very sick, even if that answer may not be as nuanced as an explanation given to an older child or adult would be. Parents of older children expected them to have a more sophisticated understanding of death, and mentioned the deaths or terminal illness of others in their age range in order to expand on the understanding that death can affect everyone, regardless of age, and does not always occur because of poor health.

**Situate the death historically and socially.** A second theme common in many of the interviews was that parents felt it was important, regardless of the age of the child, normalize death as part of the understanding shared in the sensegiving process by ensuring their children understood this death was not the first death to occur. Parents mentioned previous family pets who had died, older relatives or acquaintances the children may have known, and often mentioned the deceased in context of a reunion in heaven.

Amanda mentioned a neighbor who had died a few months prior when telling her daughter of the death of her grandfather. Amanda indicated it was not pre-planned like much of the death education talk was with Sofia, but felt it would offer some assurance that her grandfather was not the first person to have died.

But when, you know when my husband’s father died, we talked about it like ‘You know someone else who has died.’ And we talked about Norm a little bit. I don’t know why we brought it up, like maybe so she wouldn’t think this is the first time someone has ever died. (Line 455)

Later in the interview, Amanda also mentioned she referenced the death of the local fig-eater beetles Sofia had seen when talking about her grandfather’s death. By recounting these prior
experiences with death to her young daughter, she was both offering a script Sofia could reference (ex: how did people act when the neighbor died, what did ‘dead’ mean with the beetles), as well as providing the comfort of knowing that while Sofia may not have a lot of experience with death and dying, the death of her grandfather was not uncommon, and other people have encountered death before and know how to proceed.

Even Linda, whose daughter was fifteen when the family dog died, acknowledged that she and her husband felt it was important to talk about other people who had died that Jessica knew. While her husband’s conversation with Jessica was more focused on the possibilities of what happens after death, Linda believed it was meant to be reassuring for her, as she was experiencing the first death of something close to her.

He talked a lot about how everybody that we’ve ever known has passed away, experienced whatever that was. And so, if there’s something after this, you know, then we’ll be with all of them wherever they are. And if there isn’t, then there just isn’t anything, so there’s nothing to think about or worry about. (Line 196)

Linda felt her daughter understood cognitively that other people and animals have died, but believed her husband’s inclusion of a historical context that “everybody they’ve ever known” had already experienced death and any possible afterlife served as a comforting message for Jessica. The uncertainty of what happens after death, for her, was appeased by knowing the family dog Bear was not the first one to experience whatever that is.

Whether the intention is primarily to calm emotional concerns or provide referent scripts for the children to use in their own sensemaking processes, parents relayed the importance of
positioning this one death into a larger context of others for their children to understand in their sensegiving messages.

**Memories.** A third theme that arose from the interviews was the desire to keep memories of the deceased active for the child. When explaining death to young children, a few parents even included the idea that memories “keep them alive” if they chose not to include mention of an afterlife in their conversations about death. The theme regarding the importance of memories was evident among both those were and were not religious.

Diane, who did not want to mention heaven or an afterlife to her three-year-old daughter, responded to questions of where her mother was after death with talk of stories and memories.

> And I look over at my partner, who is looking at me like a deer in headlights, and I said Lily, Grandma is in our hearts and our minds, and in our memories and photos, and in all the stories we always tell, and we will never forget her. She said okay, she’s fine with that. (Line 100)

Diane did not want to suggest a location for her mother after death, i.e. a heaven that she did not believe in, and mentioned in the interview Lily was confused by her explanation of burial, so instead Diane mentioned Lily’s grandmother was still present in the family stories, pictures, or memories they had of their own time with her while she was alive.

Renee, who did use a religious explanation of heaven after death, also emphasized the importance of keeping memories of the deceased active for her children. Before her children were born, her sister-in-law died in a car accident, and when the oldest boys were very young,
her brother also passed away. Even though her children may not remember any experiences with the two relatives, Renee frequently shared pictures and stories with her sons.

It’s important to me, for even my ex-husband’s sister, to continue to involve Uncle Josh and Aunt Candi. Just so they know, even though they’re not here, that that’s still their family. (Line 132)

I have pictures of them blowing bubbles together, and I have pictures of him (Uncle Josh) holding Shane when he was a baby. Like I said, it’s very important…Also because I knew who my ex-husband’s sister was. I knew her well and it was very important to me that their memories don’t ever go away. (Line 194)

Although her children never met their Aunt Candi, and were very young when Uncle Josh died, Renee wanted her children to have some sort of a familial relationship with them, and worked to instill a sense of family by sharing photos and stories of them with her children.

Amanda, like Diane, chose a secular explanation about death with her young daughter. She noted that her husband’s grieving included sharing memories of his father with the family, and daughter Sofia would listen to the stories, but likely did not hold a sentimental attachment to them like her father did.

I don’t think it’s as meaningful for a child as for an adult. Like an adult really wants to hang on to those memories. I’m sure we’re projecting something, by helping her recall the memories. (Line 417)
This theme illustrates that participants in this study valued story sharing and communication about the deceased after death, and a few mentioned the sharing process as part of their own healing after a loss. Even those who did not believe in any continued existence after death shared that, for the living, memories, stories, and photos could be a way to keep the deceased present in their lives.

**Wait or prepare.** The fourth theme common to the interviews was the question of whether it was best to educate a child on death before someone close to them died, or wait until a relative or pet passed away to begin the conversation within that specific context. While most participants mentioned an opinion one way or the other, there was not a consensus. The trend appeared that parents whose children had not yet experienced a close death believed it best to wait on the conversation, while parents who had already gone through the process proposed preparing ahead of time.

Michelle, who had worked on definition and religious understanding of death and afterlife with her daughter Janice, aged three, said she would wait to talk about death seriously.

Right, yeah, I don’t think we’re really going to have a real heart-to-heart about it until someone close to us passes where it’s going to affect her, you know it’s not…all the sudden we won’t be able to see that person anymore. She doesn’t understand that yet, she’s just not been in that close of a relationship yet. (Line 213)

Michelle felt that any “serious” conversation about death should wait until someone died that Janice had an emotional attachment to. A “heart-to-heart” conversation about death, to Michelle,
includes emotional comforting, issues of relationships with those who have died, and incorporation of her religious values.

Linda, whose younger children were infants when the last close relative died, mentioned that she was not prepared to initiate a conversation with her older son (then five) when the twins were so young. She cited being too busy with the normal processes of everyday life that she did not have the emotional energy or the time to discuss death with her oldest before the death of her uncle. Later, when the family dog died and the younger children were fifteen, Linda held the same pattern.

With all things with my children, I waited until they brought it up. (Line 893)

By waiting until her children broached the subject, she felt confident she would not be adding any undue stress to them by talking about death before they were ready.

Angela had similar concerns with her son Michael. When asked if she would have prepared him for the sudden death of their dog had she known, she was conflicted. Initially she said yes, she would definitely have mentioned to her son what would happen with the dog, but later expressed concern that it would only have started his grieving early, and she would not want to be the cause of extending his emotional distress. She believed talking to Michael outside of the context of someone close to him dying would cause confusion.

Not necessarily that he would worry more because it’s not someone close, but that he wouldn’t necessarily understand why we’re having the conversation, understand the fullness of why we’re having the conversation. That it’s not just a ‘let’s sit down and talk,’ it’s but, no, ‘this is why we’re having the conversation.’
It’s easier for him if you’re able to draw on an experience that he’s had, or draw on something that he’s going through. It’s easier for him to connect with that versus…not. (Line 318)

To Angela, a “full” understanding of death goes beyond just definition, and should be explained in a context Michael can draw from. Angela would rather wait to have a complete, meaningful conversation about death once someone close to him has died, rather than have the beginning of a conversation on death that he may not fully comprehend.

Diane mentioned that she would have acted very differently if her mother was not given a terminal diagnosis. She admitted thinking ahead of time of the “sex talks,” but not necessarily “death talks.”

But to be fair, I always thought about sex, but I don’t think I would’ve always thought about death, except that I didn’t have anybody die when I was young, and I have gone through my own grieving process and I can see how much a part of life it might be. And so I think now, I think it should, I should always be talking about it. Every time I know of a death we should talk about it, what it would mean to the other people that they knew, and how people die and what happens when you die, and what happens to the people who are left behind and all that. I talk about it every chance I get from now on, it’s a part of like…life, growing up. (Line 951)

Diane, prior to her own mother’s death, did not expect grief and death education to be so important to her. She had thought ahead of time about sex talks with her children, but had never
examined what a “death talk” should look like. After her mother died when her children were young, she felt that death should be a regular conversation in her children’s lives. She mentioned the importance of her children understanding what death means, what it means for family or friends of the person who died, and how to help those grieving. She now feels that death, and death education, are a part of life and growing up, and she will work to prepare her children for any type of death they will experience in their lifetimes.

Amanda’s family also experienced the death of a close relative to a terminal illness, and expressed her gratitude that the family had warning and enough time to have conversations about death with Sofia. She conveyed a similar belief to Diane that continual conversations about death would benefit her daughter.

We just put it…I think the way for her to understand it is not to avoid it, but it’s to constantly talk about it, so she’s always getting a greater understanding and tying it to more pieces of knowledge she has about other things. (Line 1244)

Amanda said she would like to continue conversation about death as much as possible to help increase Sofia’s understanding of death each time she encounters it, whether it is the death of a bug at the park, or the death of a family member. By talking about death, Amanda believes Sofia will be able to add to the knowledge she currently has about death and make connections to other areas of knowledge, such as a scientific understanding of decomposition and the lifecycle.

While most parents agreed on some level that knowledge of a death ahead of time would be beneficial for their children, not all agreed that knowledge, in general, about death would be
as valuable. This conflict seems summarized well by Jackson, who said death is only a topic of conversation in their house if absolutely necessary.

   It’s kind of like a subject matter where I don’t think we talk until it’s forced to be brought up, it’s not something we typically talk about. (Line 69)

While Jackson mentioned he prizes open communication between father and son, death is a topic that is “forced” by events outside of the family and not something normally talked about in his house.

   The divide in the perceived importance of preparation could be due to a number of reasons. It could be that parents who already had the initial conversation about death and loss found it less threatening in retrospect, and therefore were more supportive of constant conversation about death, or that, like the other parents mentioned, a context or referent was already established for their children, and any future conversations about death would build on the scripts their children already possessed.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Making Sense

My research goals for this project were to understand sensemaking as practiced by parents when participating in death-related communication, and to examine what type of meanings they shared with their children through the sensegiving process. The incidents relayed by the participants were incredibly diverse. Many had experienced the death of a close relative, a few lost members of their immediate family, and some experienced the death of cherished family pets. Others were working with their children on building a more conceptual understanding of death without any personal knowledge for the child to reference. Even with the myriad of experiences recalled and shared by the participants, events still fell within the parameters of Weick’s (1969) sensemaking.

Throughout the varied stories, the process of sensemaking and the mentioned characteristics that influence the process were evident as parents gave attention to and interpreted certain cues from their current environment, searched their own personal histories or general social knowledge for related events, and determined how to proceed in their current environment based on evaluation of the appropriateness of the recalled events. If parents perceived the present situation to be similar to a past experience, and valued the historical outcomes of that experience, action was taken in accordance with the referent social script, with adjustments made as needed to satisfy the current environment (ex: When Hiro was six, his parents explained death to him after his grandmother died. Presently, his son’s friend lost a brother. The context is different, but
Hiro found the explanation and his resulting understanding appropriate, so Hiro will continue the script with minor alterations).

If parents perceived the current situation as too different from a past personal experience (ex: If Hiro only remembers conversation about death in the context of fishing and eating what was caught), or did not deem the outcomes of past experiences successful (ex: Hiro remembers being overly concerned with his fear of death as a child and held misconceptions he wants to avoid with his son), parents sought out new scripts from their social environment in line with their personal goals and values, or worked on creating a new script with their child.

If there was no perceived or remembered frame of reference, parents reported feeling very uncertain about how to proceed with the death-related conversation. Participants mentioned feeling they were “winging” conversations that were too important to be unprepared for, but could not recall any past experience which would provide them direction in their current circumstance.

**Influences on sensemaking.** It is important to emphasize here the relative, personal nature of sensemaking as it occurs within a specific social context. As Weick could not present sensemaking simply as a process with various stages, the experiences relayed by the participants cannot be examined without the incorporation of certain factors Weick (1995) mentioned as characteristics of sensemaking. These characteristics distinguish sensemaking from other interpretive or enactment models, and influence both the sensemakers at an individual level as well as the resulting “sense” they present to others. While seven characteristics are incorporated into general analysis of the sensemaking process, two characteristics appeared to influence the
experiences of this study’s participants more than others: the social nature of communication, and the importance of identity. It must be noted that these characteristics of sensemaking are not distinct. Identity influences goals, social context influences roles, and what script a person is able to recall can be dependent on what identity or social norm they believe is a priority in the moment. These characteristics are enactive, as well. Socialization and ascribed identity both guide and constrain the sensemaking processes of groups and individuals.

**Social support and social influence.** As mentioned previously, sensemaking is inherently social. An individual is not necessarily singular, but instead is an actor within an environment of others. Parents I spoke with were largely explaining their own personal experiences and interpretation of those experiences, but those interpretations resulted from both individual and social activity, and were shared interpersonally through the sensegiving process with their children, and again with me at the time of interview.

A few participants mentioned the use and appreciation of outside support from their familial or social networks. Parents mentioned comforting messages offered by neighbors and friends, and offers of advice and assistance from others to help with explaining death to their children. Professionals like Hospice workers, hospital staff, and funeral home directors who encountered death regularly offered resources to some participants, including instructional pamphlets and children’s books. Other participants relied on advice or clarification given by trusted members of their community, like religious leaders, parental figures, or child educators.

When asked if they would seek the help of an outside expert as it arose in the interview conversation, and who they would consider such an expert, a few participants mentioned people
who acted as part of similar social networks that imply shared goals and values: older family members, Sunday School teachers, a pastor at a non-denominational church visited on occasion by the family, and others in online support groups. Participants mentioned they would seek help, if needed, from people like themselves, who were perceived to share the same scripts and social values. Some participants even told of their own experiences sharing their created or adopted scripts with others in their social network who they believed held similar goals.

It appears for these participants that conversation about death is one where it is important to get things “right,” regardless of their personal definition of “right.” To contrast this with the previously mentioned resources offered by healthcare and funerary professionals, mothers who were offered those resources (pamphlets, children’s books), mentioned they did not bother to read them or found them unsatisfactory. Whether that judgement is based on the messages of those resources themselves, or a judgement based on a source coming from an outside, unknown set of values, remains uncertain.

In the context of this research, individuals had many social roles which were influential in their initial experience of events and their retelling at the interview; participants were members of their family of origin, had families of their own, were members of social groups like churches or specific-interest clubs, and members of a specific culture. Enacted identity, social scripts, and even the language used to explain are all dependent on the social context of an individual.

Some participants mentioned they were members of certain social groups, and implicitly or explicitly acted in accordance with the values, beliefs, and norms of those groups. The most
common example of this would be the influence of religious affiliation on the sensemaking process. Numerous participants associated with some form of religion, and brought in religious aspects to their conversations about death. Parents frequently paired a conversation about death with talk of heaven, mentioned by parents as providing emotional comfort and hope for their children. Parents also recalled explaining a reunion in heaven after death with other relatives, which echoes the theme of socially and historically situating a death by mentioning relatives or known others who had died previously. Some parents used talk of heaven to replace mentions of death, specifically, in conversation with their children. As noted earlier, one participant said she didn’t like to use the word “dead” unless she had to “get to the point” quickly, and instead preferred to use talk of heaven to reference death and an afterlife.

Participants who opted to reject a religious script for explaining death to children felt they were operating against the dominant culture. While many of these participants noted membership to other social groups with specific values like Montessori parenting or a grief group for non-believers, they talked about American culture as synonymous with a religious culture. A few participants noted the use of heaven in talk about death by people who do not consider themselves religious, and one participant expressed her frustration at common comforting messages given to those grieving, because language surrounding death is so frequently religious in nature that, she felt, it excludes or angers people with different beliefs. Participants who rejected the perceived dominant script of heaven frequently offered justifications for their choice, whether through stories of their own restrictive upbringing with religion, or reasoning behind the adoption of a replacement belief system. These participants were the ones who mentioned
feeling uncertain at the start of their death-related conversations, or uncertain when preparing for them, because they were operating on an alternate script, or actively creating one in conversation. Parents of young children who decided to not incorporate talk of heaven in their conversations also mentioned instances of working to “protect” their chosen script from outside mentions of the dominant heaven explanation. This implies that rejecting a script that most of the culture is socialized into may be more work for the parents: examining why the dominant explanation is inappropriate and forming an account to be given to others, creation of alternate explanation, maintenance of alternate script as child develops, and defense of explanation against the culturally dominant script.

Religion was not the only script that some participants believed was common in the American culture, yet still rejected. A few participants who were active in grief communities and had incorporated that membership into their own personal identities shared their evaluation of the limitations placed on the bereaved by American culture, specifically as they pertained to emotions and the grieving process. Many participants who mentioned emotional states when recounting their conversations about death mentioned the emphasis they placed on talking about emotions after a close death, which is in opposition to the cultural requirement of emotional control in the face of death expected by the American culture. This could be an indication that culture is changing, although it is more likely a product of the context: young children dealing with their first death, within the home, in conversation with parents who are concerned about their emotional well-being. There was no mention in the interviews about public grieving of
children, so it is difficult to say if this is a new social norm developing, or more likely just a rule for behavior within the privacy of the home.

**Identity and role conflict.** Identity, much like the understanding created through the sensemaking process, is social in nature and changes with context. A displayed aspect of a person’s identity is selected in response to the environment, and affects the understanding they create in the sensemaking process, as well as the understanding they share with others through the sensegiving process. Throughout their explanations of the sensemaking process, most participants indicated the influence of more than one aspect of their identity. The two most prevalent findings concerning identity within the interviews was adoption of the role of educator, and the experience of role conflict.

In response to questions asked by children or notice of a terminal illness or death, many parent participants adopted the identity of educator when explaining death to their children, specifically about death, grief, and emotions. For many, the role of educator was not new. For others, it felt more uncertain. Parents who felt confident in their continuation of a previous social script, especially if they viewed that script as a dominant cultural script, felt more prepared for the conversations about death with their children. These participants had either personally witnessed this script in the past, or relied on the social knowledge of that script as theoretical experience. As mentioned earlier, parents who could not recall any script, or who were rejecting their referent script, felt uncertain about the initial conversations and worked more hesitantly with a “trial and error” approach.
Whether they felt unsure about their role or not, parents operated as educators on different levels. Many provided a definition of death, some provided an additional explanation of heaven, and many reported giving information about emotion and the grieving process to their children. Parents recalled modelling behavior for their children, and using their own experience of grief as an educational opportunity. Many parents relayed events where children asked why they were crying. Parents reported replying with information on complex emotions, feeling multiple emotions at once, or explanations of sadness that comes with the death of something or someone you loved.

Parents provided stories of alternate roles as well. While being a parent was a requirement of participation, participants were also husbands or wives, sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, and friends to those who died. Participants shared their experiences, and the conflict felt, when they had to operate in the role of mother or father to explain death and what that means to their child, while feeling grief over the loss of someone, themselves, and how the conflicting roles impacted their sensemaking and sensegiving processes. Most frequent was the situation where a mother experienced the loss of a parent, and multiple participants expressed frustration that they could not grieve as a daughter themselves when they had the responsibility of being a parent at the same time. Feelings of guilt and selfishness were mentioned as results of this role conflict. Participants either prioritized the role of mother and felt guilty that they were not properly grieving their parent or attending to guests at a funeral service, or prioritized their role as daughter and felt selfish for abandoning their children to their own grief. The death of a loved one is a difficult experience in and of itself. Recognizing the impact role conflict may have
on the bereaved could encourage partners to temporarily relieve them of responsibilities associated with one role so they can focus on the requirements of the other.

**Continuing conversation and clarification.** Participants also acknowledged that conversations about death were ongoing, and often needed further clarification. Many parents told of plans to make clear parts of their explanation that resulted in misconceptions, or to work with their child to develop a more complete understanding of the lifecycle and their own mortality as they matured. If, upon evaluation, parents did not find their previous explanation complete or appropriate, many parents mentioned the forgiving nature of the parent-child relationship and said that conversations were frequently revisited if their children asked additional questions later, or displayed some indication that their own understanding was not complete.

Some parents recounted multiple conversations with the same child over his or her childhood to date. One parent helped her child remember seeing dead bugs previously when explaining what “dead” meant in the context of her grandfather. By referencing pieces of earlier conversation about death when adding new information, parents helped their children to construct a more complete script of death. Parents with multiple children mentioned the use of their death conversation with the oldest child as a reference point for conversations with younger children, meaning the script continued or created in that first interaction was shared among family members. While this led to one participant’s child feeling like a “Guinea pig,” parents can rely on both their past experience, as well as their evaluation of that script, to better interpret and share understanding with the next child.
Messages about Death

Studies on sensemaking allow us to see the “behind the scenes” of message construction based on the sensemaker’s understanding of the environment and perceived appropriateness of recalled or newly created social scripts. As with sensemaking, sensegiving, or relaying that created understanding to others, is greatly influenced by goals and concerns, personal and group identity, socialization, and what scripts a person has access to.

Context greatly influences what is perceived, how and what sense is made, and what messages are shared in the sensegiving process. The twelve participants in this study were all operating under very different circumstances, but as a whole presented a similar set of messages about death to their children. Death was explained as something that normally causes sadness and grief, happens when someone (or something) is very old or very sick, and allows people to remember, honor, and mourn the dead by sharing memories because the family loved them very much.

While not unanimous, a majority of the participants also included an aspect of hope in their explanations of death, citing a reunion in heaven after death with all the loved ones who had died before. Those who intentionally did not include a specific “hope message” of a religious or culturally-common definition of heaven frequently gave justifications in the interview for rejecting the perceived dominant script.

In addition to the explicit messages indicated here, implicit messages were also conveyed through the parents’ willingness to talk about the deceased after death, talk about their own emotions and grieving process, and encouragement of follow-up questions for clarification when
needed. Both implicit and explicit messages noticed by children convey social norms and expectations about death, and work to directly socialize children into acceptable behavior, while providing an operational script that can be referenced the next time a child encounters death.

**Implications of Research**

**Theoretical implications.** Weick’s (1969) sensemaking is typically studied within the context of organizations encountering some sort of an interruption, most frequently an interruption labelled as a crisis. While there was no consensus among my participants of their own experienced being crises (likely due to the varying context of each situation and the length of time elapsed between the initial conversations with children and the interview) sensemaking still fit very well with the investigation of how parents prepare for death-related communication with their children.

Communication studies on sensemaking could focus on instances of interruption by looking for low-probability topics of conversation that may prompt a salient sensemaking experience to understand a possible “conversational crisis.” Sensemaking studies could be applied to unusual interruptions in conversation, disruptive behavior in classrooms, or any other context where an unexpected event, or event that is believed to be very uncommon, disrupts order and causes people to work to actively make sense of their changed environment.

Within the context of family communication, research on sensemaking during interruptions provides an interesting look at active, decisive socialization of children by parents, who are themselves actors-in-environment. Parents choose, either consciously or unconsciously,
to accept or reject frames of reference based on their own identities, goals, and understanding of the environment. Whether the decision is analyzed at the time, or retrospectively during the interview process, conversation between participant and interviewer has the possibility to examine recalled possible scripts and determine why a specific script was used. While it is important to understand what parents choose to say to their children, the explanation of why those decisions were made can provide more insight into the family environment, goals and concerns held by the parent, and priorities in socialization. By studying a point of interruption, in this case the unexpected or unprepared conversation about death with a child, the sensemaking process becomes more salient for participants, and allows reflective analysis of motivation and message.

This study adds to the current body of communication research on death and parent-child interactions by applying the organizational process of sensemaking to the family. By examining the sensemaking experience of parents engaging in conversation about death with their children, this research goes beyond examining the experience of death as a variable for participants, and looks instead at the creation, distribution, and interpretation of meaning.

What was unexpected during my examination of the accounts of sensemaking and sensegiving was the incredible influence of social scripts on almost every stage of the process. Much like Weick’s (1995) seven characteristics of sensemaking that affect the process at all stages, it appears for the participants of this study that social scripts were active and influential throughout the sensemaking and sensegiving processes.
While social scripts, frames of reference, or schemata are mentioned in some works on sensemaking as something an extracted cue is compared to, social scripts had a much larger function than simply referents in the accounts of my participants. Social scripts were interrelated with identity and social context for participants, and additional research distinguishing among and clarifying the function of the three could result in an understanding of the sensemaking process more applicable to contexts outside of an organizational crisis. At the very least, an examination of social scripts held by the participants would allow the researcher to understand what the possible options are for action during sensemaking.

**Practical implications.** Understanding the way parents make sense of death and share that created meaning with their children can have a few practical applications with continued conversation between parents and researchers. Parents in this study considered education about death to be the responsibility of the family, and knew little about what information schools taught their children about death. In the same vein, researchers and educators know very little about what families say about death to their children, but work to provide recommendations. Continued research designed to stay close to the lived experience of participants may help better understand and alleviate concerns about death-related communication, and provide instruction and recommendations that are socially relevant to parents. Parents in this study mentioned concerns of emotional well-being for their children, developmentally appropriate explanations, and for some, continuing a religious explanation of death and an afterlife. Providing parents with resources they consider reliable, whether they be academic, religious, or community-based, that address these concerns could help to reduce the wariness surrounding death-related
conversations and ensure parents and children both are able to make sense of and cope successfully with loss.

There are times when talk about death is unavoidable, such as loss of a close friend or family member, or tragic events in the community like the recent shootings in Orlando. In such times, parents may seek instruction for explanations that are outside the realm of their own personal experience or socialized scripts. It would be beneficial for educators, counsellors, and parents to know what types of messages will be relayed in other contexts so as not to contradict messages or cause confusion, and to ensure that children develop a mature understanding of death.

**Limitations and Future Research**

What I have found most amusing about studying sensemaking is the increased awareness of my own sensemaking processes. This modified grounded theory research project, as an example, can certainly be considered a sensemaking endeavor, and this paper my attempt at sensegiving. While the process did not begin with an interruption or crisis (unless a desire to finish the program counts as crisis), I found myself at a point surrounded by an equivocal environment (interview transcripts), actively enacting my environment (asking questions during interviews that directed conversation based on my own coding and emerging understanding), attending to some cues over others, and comparing those selected cues to reference points from academic literature. Based on fit with the data (my environment), references were accepted or discarded as I tried to make some sense for myself.
**Limitations.** Unlike general sensemaking, this specific research project cannot be ongoing, and a concrete beginning and end point mean an actionable, plausible understanding can be considered an achievement. As Weick et al. (2005) wrote, “People may get better stories, but they will never get the story” (p. 415). In the true, retrospective nature of sensemaking, things often become clearer in hindsight, and I will discuss here the few areas where adjustment could have resulted in “better,” or at least richer, stories.

**Study design.** This project began with an area of research to study and no clear idea of how to do so, or really what questions I wanted to ask. I recognized the desire to know about how parents explain death to children, but couldn’t decide the best way to get that information. I couldn’t actually have parents discuss death with children for the first time in a lab, or ask them to write out hypothetical conversation starters- it wouldn’t be natural. How you plan something, and how events unfold in a complex environment are often quite different. I appreciated the idea of a media study using the picture books that inspired this project, but couldn’t justify the project if I didn’t know that anyone actually used the books outside of a counseling context. There were so many ideas on what I could do with the research that it was difficult to decide where to start.

When I found the constructivist grounded theory method it seemed the perfect fit for my indecision. The method presented a mode of inquiry that let the data, or the information from the participants, lead the research. I would be “finding” only things participants declared important, and truly be able to let their voices give direction. It wouldn’t be only my opinion of how important a specific thing was, or worse, months of research wasted on something that would have no applicability for the participants themselves.
However, grounded theory does not easily fit itself into the traditional thesis project parameters. While trying to stay unbiased by current literature, I had to write a literature review for the proposal. When coding data, I was looking at the metaphorical clock for an answer that would allow me to complete a project in some semblance of “on time.” Once analysis began, it was difficult to quickly adopt a framework or theory that could be applied, knowing I didn’t yet have the full picture from my participants. What I ended up with was a data-rich project that (much in the fashion of sensemaking) I didn’t fully understand until I had to start writing.

This project ended as a significantly modified application of the grounded theory methods proposed. The main inheritance seen in this work is the intention of prioritizing the experience and world views of the participants, and the methods of analyzing data proposed by Charmaz (2006). Traditional grounded theory studies yield a mid-range theory that explains the process or realities constructed by the participants, which can then be tested in future research. When the data analysis began on this project, themes of roles, social scripts, and shared meaning kept appearing, and despite my best intentions to stay true to the method and “develop a theory,” this turned into a “does it fit” project. Thankfully, sensemaking appears to fit well with the experiences shared.

While I am generally pleased with the resulting data, I do believe the overall design of the project could have been more effective. Time spent on the project could have been lessened immensely if I had an inkling of what sensemaking was prior to a class in public relations, but I truly feel a grounded approach to the interviews was more honest, and more useful, than starting with a theory and trying to make my data fit.
As a suggestion for graduate students attempting a grounded theory study in the future, I reference Kvale’s (2006) suggestion interviewing participants initially, roughing out an analysis, and returning to the participants for verification towards the end of the project to check that your interpretation of their experience is correct. Instead of focusing on larger recruitment numbers, asking ten volunteers to participate in an initial interview and a shorter follow-up would ensure reliability to the participants’ lived experiences, accountability of the researcher, and an opportunity for greater examination of unclear situations. This continual focus on the experience of the participants may lead to a clearer “development” of a process in keeping with un-modified grounded theory approaches, but may still be unattainable under time constraints presented by a thesis project.

**Participant recruitment.** A goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the sensemaking and sensegiving process for parents communicating about death with their children. The aim was to get a ‘snapshot’ picture of what the conversations look like, as well as a brief understanding of the parents’ experiences preparing for and going through the discussions. As the desired scope of the goal was broad, participant recruitment was not limited by type of death, age of children (within the range of 3-18), or any other factor. The only requirements for participants was that the parent be over 18, the child be within the very broad age range, and that the parent had conversed with their child about death previously.

At the outset of the project, I proposed 15-20 interviews lasting about 60 minutes each. I ended with 12 interviews, ranging in time from 48 minutes to 157 minutes. While the number of interviews was not set by a standard for constructivist grounded theory projects or based on any
sort of algorithm for hours spent transcribing, it seemed an easy number for a thesis project. I figured it would be simple to find parents willing to talk with me for an hour or so in the name of (social) science. I believe if death did not factor in to the conversation that would have been the case.

Within my own social network, there were many parents who had either not talked to their children about death with any sort of recalled significance, or who did not feel comfortable talking about it with me. One interview volunteer seemed so uncomfortable with the topic that answers were frequently prefaced with long silences, and conversation went in the direction of “movie magic,” video game respawn, and superheroes under the guise of death in media. Two volunteers who appeared relatively comfortable during the interviews were not willing to post the IRB-approved research flyer on their Facebook accounts (the channel most participants were recruited from) because they didn’t feel it was appropriate content or in keeping with the image of their public profiles. Finding volunteers was much more difficult than initially expected, and I attribute this to the general culture’s hesitance to talk about unpleasant things (and the classification of death as definitively “unpleasant”). Most people responded to my explanation of research with comments like “Wow, that’s depressing,” or something similar. Even people I was not trying to recruit wanted little to do with the topic.

I found my most engaged participants were also active in social support groups specifically for those grieving with children, grieving the loss of their own children, or with specific concerns like ‘secular’ grieving. I believe narrowing the focus of participants to one distinct category may have aided in recruitment, specifically if there was a targeted group (for
example, those on the Facebook group “Grieving for Non-Believers”) with a gatekeeper as a liaison. An alteration like this would change the focus of the study, but could be useful for recruiting more participants.

It may also have lessened the reluctance to talk about death if the research focused on a less-threatening death, particularly on the death of pets in the family. While death of a pet can be a terrible experience, many participants started their interviews with talk of family pets, and later told of relatives who had passed, or mentioned the death of pets was easier to explain to their children and talk about with others. While the purpose of qualitative work is not to draw conclusions to a larger population, it is helpful to get an in-depth understanding of people’s experience of one specific event. Due to the diverse range of experiences of my participants, finding specific themes and filling emerging categories was difficult. Focusing on one specific set of circumstances (while understanding there will still be great differences between each person’s experience of those circumstances), may have made for an easier analysis, more definitive themes, and greater saturation of data. If the one specific circumstance chosen is viewed as more palatable to the general population, it would likely also result in greater participation.

While these changes to recruitment could have potentially increased the number of respondents, I do feel getting a rough picture of death conversations in any context is a valuable starting point for research on family-level sensemaking about death, and more focused participant recruitment could be used for more specific goals of future research.
Future studies. There were so many interesting themes in the conversations with participants that it feels the opportunities for future research are innumerable. Areas of particular interest to family-level sensemaking include the ongoing process as children age, the role of religious affiliation, and large-scale community sensemaking and sensegiving after tragedies.

Sensemaking as children mature. In accordance with Slaughter and Griffiths’ (2007) finding that a complete understanding of death occurs around age ten, parent participants seemed to switch focus from an understanding of the concept of death, to a healthy understanding of the emotional responses to death in their interviews. If acquisition of the various biological concepts of death (Nonfunctionality, Inevitability, Causality, and Irreversibility) begins as children enter middle childhood (Slaughter and Lyons, 2003), it would be fascinating to see how parents alter their messages, goals, and evaluations of success over time.

If time and participants permitted, a longitudinal study, or a study of clustered participants with children at different stages, could provide valuable insight into how parents notice that their children are ready for more complex messages, change or build on the less-nuanced understanding of death from their previous conversations, and decide what is important to explain about death once a mature understanding of death as a concept is attained.

Religious affiliation. One of the more persistent themes that was not fully examined in this paper was the role religious affiliation played in the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of parent participants in the study. While it is explained, primarily in its role as a referent social script, religious affiliation and how it affects death-related conversations would be a worthwhile area for future study. Many parents indicated they had talked with their children about death, and
upon questioning mentioned they had talked to their children about heaven, an afterlife, and reunion with friends and family after death, but not death in any biological or physical terms.

Previous research has looked at the influence of religion and spirituality on children’s understanding and “biological misconceptions,” (see for example Harris & Giménez, 2005; Renaud et al., 2013; Rosengren et al., 2014a) but not on the meaning creation of parents who value religious affiliation. The meaning of heaven varied among my participants, but the function stayed the same. Heaven was seen as a calming, “soft” way to explain death to children that gave hope and reassured that this death was not the end. It would be interesting to research if talk of heaven, for these families, efficiently encapsulates all aspects of the death conversation, or replaces them. And if an understanding of heaven does include an understanding of death, are the families responsible for this education, or is the primary site of socialization their religious community?

Sensemaking and tragedy. Recent events in Orlando also bring up the question of how parents explain other types of death and violence to children. Hate crimes and acts of terror have occurred recently on a much larger scale than the family deaths this research focused on, but may provide a less emotionally-threatening (to the family) opportunity for parents to explain death, dying, and grief to children. Large-scale tragedies are frequently ubiquitous in the media weeks after the event occurs, meaning children in the affected areas are likely more aware of the situations than parents may expect. Communities work together to create sense of tragedies, and present a unique opportunity to examine sensegiving from a source outside the family and how
that sense is accepted, rejected, or altered within the family in light of their own goals, identities, and previous social scripts.

**Conclusion**

This research was a valuable exercise in applying Weick’s (1969) sensemaking process to a family-level context using a modified grounded theory approach for a thesis research project. Sensemaking, with its inclusion of enactment, social context, and identity, fits very well with the constructivist grounded theory approach and the cultural view of communication. With this method, research seeks to understand the reality of the participant and produce an account of the participant’s understanding of events, motivations, actions, and any meaning attributed to them (Charmaz, 2012). Sensemaking aligns well with the relativist epistemology and the understanding that realities are created from, situated and negotiated in, a specific environment (Charmaz, 2012), and Carey’s (1989) cultural approach to communication where reality is created, maintained, and changed through communication. Examination of sensemaking provides researchers with a unique look at how various aspects of personal and family identity, social scripts and individual socialization, and context inform and shape the noticing of events, meaning attribution, evaluation of the relationship between current and past events or frames of reference, and influence action. Investigation of sensegiving allows researchers to understand the priorities at play during message creation, examine the recalled messages, and see how participants work to share their own realities with others through communication.
This study provided me the opportunity to further the conversation between parents and academics about what actually happens during death-related conversation. Through this research project, I was given the opportunity to learn from twelve individuals what their conversations looked like, how they plan to talk about death over time, and what motivated their messages.

Parents serve as the primary source of information for children about death, and attempting to understand the way a parent creates and shares meaning about a topic that can be seen as difficult or unpleasant in our culture, is an important endeavor I hope continues in communication research.
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Carrie A. Wartmann

Date: February 23, 2015

Dear Researcher:

On 02/23/2015, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

- Type of Review: Exempt Determination
- Project Title: PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE: PARENTAL PREPARATION FOR DEATH-FOCUSED COMMUNICATION
- Investigator: Carrie A. Wartmann
- IRB Number: SBE-15-10952
- Funding Agency: N/A
- Grant Title: N/A
- Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in IRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziesielska, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

[Signature]

IRB Coordinator
APPENDIX B: IRB ADDENDUM AND MODIFICATION REQUEST APPROVAL
Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA0000351, IRB00001138

To: Carrie A. Wartmann

Date: April 20, 2016

Dear Researcher:

On 04/20/2016, the IRB approved the following minor modifications to activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulations:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination
Modification Type: Study will be extended through to August 2016 and recruitment through websites was added. A revised protocol has been uploaded in IRIS.
Project Title: PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE: PARENTAL PREPARATION FOR DEATH-FOCUSED COMMUNICATION
Invesigator: Carrie A. Wartmann
IRB Number: SBB-15-10952
Funding Agency: N/A
Grant Title: N/A
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in IRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziesielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

[Signature]

IRB Coordinator
APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER
Research Participants Needed

Death is something everyone will one day encounter, yet American society has a tendency to avoid or deny death in everyday life and language. Death makes people uncomfortable, and many view it as a topic too complex for children to understand. But children witness big and little deaths in their lives: of pets, relatives, plants, and favorite fairy tale characters. When a child experiences death, they may have questions for parents or other trusted adults which our current avoidance-oriented society does not prepare us for.

The aim of the study is to explain the processes parents go through when preparing for death-related communication with their children, to gain an understanding of what a parent deems important or unnecessary, what resources they view as reliable and why, what goals and concerns they have when communicating about death with children, and how they judge successes and failures. I hope to better understand how the social context influences the messages and how parents judge the amount and type of information to provide to children about death.

In-person or phone interviews will last approximately one hour and be audio recorded. Interviews will focus on what types of conversations you’ve had with your child, your goals and concerns relating to your child’s education on death, any resources used, and your evaluation of the conversations.

Participant Requirements:

- Must be 18 or older
- Parent of at least one child between ages 3-18
- Have previously discussed death with child

Please contact with any questions/concerns, or to set up an interview.

Carrie Wartmann

Nicholson School of Communication, University of Central Florida

Email: cwartmann@knights.ucf.edu

Phone: (754) 300-7063

Preparing for the Inevitable: Parental Preparation for Death-Focused Communication

IRB Number SBE-15-10952
APPENDIX D: INITIAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
**Intro**

With your assistance today, I hope to gain a better understanding of what the process is like for parents who are discussing the subject of death with their children. The goal of the study is not to pass judgment on what you as a parent have done with your child. Instead I ask for information from you, as an expert who has already been through the process, to help me better understand what goals and concerns you have concerning death education for your child, what context the conversation arose within, how you handled the conversation, and if you sought any assistance from resources to aid you. Even though each child and situation will be different, I am looking for common patterns or similar processes among the interview participants.

Academic research about children’s understanding of death focuses primarily on how children understand death as a biological concept, and also some individual cases from child psychologists where children and parents have sought clinical assistance with grief, but there is little information available about how parents talk to their children about death, or what the preparation and outcomes of these everyday conversations entail for both parties.

This interview will be audio recorded with your permission, and while I have a few questions prepared ahead of time, please let me know if you do not wish to answer a question and we can move on to another line of inquiry. If at any point you wish to withdraw from the study, I will be happy to comply. Personal information like the names of you and those we discuss will be changed to nicknames during the research process to ensure confidentiality.

Are there any questions you would like to ask me before we begin?
Filter Question: Have you ever had a conversation with your child about death? Please tell me about it.

Event

Initial event

- What sparked the initial conversation regarding death with your child? (ex: personal loss, media image, general curiosity)
- Where did the conversation take place?
- Tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you first approached the subject?
- How did your child react? (Engaged, ambivalent, distressed)
- Did you own personal emotions or attitude towards death effect your interaction with your child?

Secondary event

- Did death arise as a subject of conversation again? (same child or different)
- How did you manage the conversation a second time around?
- Did you say/do anything differently? Why?

Rituals

- Did you and your child develop any rituals to help them understand death or remember the deceased?
- Were there any community rituals (ie: funerals) that your child took part in? Why or why not?

Resources

Personal Resources

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• Do you recall any personal experience you had with death as a child?
  ○ Did that/they influence how you interacted with your child?
• What, if anything, did you know about your child’s concept of death prior to the event?

Expert Resources

• Where would you go for advice, guidance, or information on this? (Family, friends, community leaders, teachers, etc.)
• Who would you consider an expert on this? Why?
  ○ Do you feel you have access to these experts?

Media Resources

• Did you reference any movies, books, or TV shows your child may have been familiar with?
• Are there any media portrayals of death geared towards children which make you uncomfortable? What portrayal of death or dying is your favorite? Why?
• Are you concerned about what education your child may be getting from other sources regarding death?

Goals and Concerns

• Who, if anyone, influenced your actions? (Charmaz, 2006, p.30)
• Were you at all concerned about how others would view what you told your child?
• To you, what was the most important thing you wanted your child to take away from the conversations?
  ○ What was your imagined best-case scenario?
• What was your biggest concern about the conversation?
  ○ The worst-case scenario?
• How do you feel the event actually rated on that best-worst case spectrum?
• Did you ever discuss what information your child should relay to others about the event?
• Did you ever make a conscious decision about how honest or open you would be with your child regarding death? What influenced your decision?
- Were there certain words or phrases you used/avoided to explain death to your child?
- Did you check for misconceptions or understanding?

**Closing**

- As you look back on these events, are there any other conversations or events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe it? (Charmaz, 2006, p.30)
- After having these experiences, what advice would you give someone who is preparing for a death-related talk with their child?
- Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your situation better? (Charmaz, 2006, p.30)
- Is there anything you would like to ask me? (Charmaz, 2006, p.30)

As mentioned before, any personal names given will be changed to pseudonyms when the recording is typed up, do you have a preferred name I can use for you (and your child)?

In the next few days the conversation we’ve had will be written out and reviewed to find areas I can explore in later interviews with other participants. Your insight is incredibly valuable to me personally, and I appreciate you volunteering your time, thank you very much for assisting me with the research.
Announcing the Final Examination of Carrie Ann Wartmann for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

Date, Time, & Location: July 5, 2016, 3:00 p.m. in NSC 228

Title: Preparing for the Inevitable: Sensemaking in Parent-Child Discussions of Death

Death is something everyone will one day encounter, yet American society has a tendency to avoid or deny death in everyday life and language. Death makes people uncomfortable, and many view it as a topic too complex for children to understand. Children, however, witness big and little deaths in their lives: of pets, relatives, plants, and favorite fairy tale characters. When a child experiences a death, he or she may have questions for parents or other trusted adults which our current avoidance-geared society does not prepare adults for.

Children exist in a specific cultural context, and learn rules and expectations of society from an early age. How society views a subject like death will influence how it is talked about, experienced, and learned. Parents and families serve as the primary means of socialization for young children and hold a position of expertise within the parent-child dynamic. Both sociocultural and personal beliefs about death will influence how a parent approaches death education with his or her child.

Through examination of the sensemaking and sensegiving accounts of parent participants, this study sought to understand what the process is like for parents who are discussing the subject of death with their children, what goals and concerns parents have, what information a parent privileges as important within the social and historical context of the conversation, and what resources he or she accesses, if any, to assist with communication. By
framing the participants’ experiences as “making sense” of a social environment after an interruption, this study was able to investigate the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving in an interpersonal context between parent and child, the roles of Weick’s (1995) characteristics of sensemaking, implicit and explicit messages relayed to children about death, and the influence of social scripts on both processes.

Twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather accounts in context of parents who had previously discussed death with their children. Interviews were analyzed based on a modified constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). The study was designed to remain as close to the relayed experience of the participants as possible with hope that information from the participants’ experiences will be useful for both academics and parents as a future resource for preparing for parent-child communication about death.

Committee Members:
Dr. Sally Hastings (Chair)
Dr. Harry Weger
Dr. George Musambira
REFERENCE


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