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Running head: MOTHERLESS MOTHERS

Motherless Mothers: Maternally Bereaved Women in Their Everyday Roles as Mothers

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### Abstract

Motherless mothers are women who lose their mothers to death prior to having their children, and therefore raise their children without the maternal support and guidance afforded to many women whose mothers are still alive (Edelman, 2006). A qualitative research design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the everyday experiences faced by motherless mothers. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten motherless mothers. Four major themes emerged including grief, support, absence of knowledge, and changes to self following loss. Results provide insight into the ongoing influence a mother's death can have on a daughter's life and draw distinction to specific issues faced by motherless mothers in their everyday mother roles. Results of this research also have implications for clinicians and others working with maternally bereaved women who are entering or experiencing the mother role.

Keywords : Bereavement, Grief , Mothering, Motherless Mothers, Motherloss

The transition to motherhood is a major event in a woman's development (Mercer, 2004), with childrearing being viewed as one of the most fulfilling yet challenging responsibilities of adult life. The early days of parenting can be stressful (Hogg & Worth, 2009) and overwhelming, and research has highlighted the importance of an external source of support in helping buffer the demands of childrearing (Nystrom & Ohrling, 2004). The emotional and practical support provided by grandparents, in particular the maternal grandmother, has been shown to be particularly beneficial to mothers of young children (Mitchell & Green, 2002). For example, Cronin (2003) found maternal grandmothers play pivotal roles as sources of informal childcare, and in helping daughters foster positive maternal identities through emotional support, advice and guidance. Further, Cronin also found maternal grandmother support to be the only source of support that is consistent and ongoing, with support from other sources (such as friends) tending to be periodic and diminishing over time. Although maternal grandmothers can be an important source of both practical and emotional support for daughters during their childrearing years, not all women have the support of their mothers when they have their children. The absence of maternal grandmother support can occur for a number of reasons (for example geographical distance, or illness) however for some women, their mothers pass away prior to them entering motherhood - which raises the issue of how women who lose their mothers to death prior to having their children experience the mother role.

The death of a mother is often considered a defining moment in a daughter's life as, from the point of the mother's death, the daughter loses her primary guide, source of identification, and role model for many issues associated with being female (Chodorow, 1978; Edelman, 1994; Pill & Zabin, 1997). Traditionally, bereavement over the loss of a loved one has been viewed as

a finite process involving a series of emotional 'stages' with the belief being grief becomes resolved once all the stages have been completed (Kübler-Ross, 1997). Researchers have since challenged this view, suggesting bereavement is more of an ongoing cyclical process that is revisited and accommodated by the mourner as they develop and mature through life (Silverman, 2000). Rando (1993) suggests that as the bereaved find ways to continue their lives without their loved one, it is also common for resurgences of acute grief to occur. Termed "sudden temporary upsurges of grief, or STUG reactions" (p. 64), these brief periods of renewed grief are typically triggered by precipitants such as previously shared experiences, anniversaries, developmental milestones and family occasions. For a daughter who has lost her mother to death, the process of mourning is likely to be reactivated as she develops and matures through life (Pill & Zabin, 1997). Moreover, because a daughter's development is based on identification with her mother (Chodorow, 1978), the daughter is likely to experience acute resurgences of grief at milestones typically characterised by mother-daughter connection (Pill & Zabin, 1997; Rando, 1993). Furthermore, the grief experienced by daughters when they first become mothers can be particularly intense as it is at this point they revisit their grief from a mother's perspective (Edelman, 2006).

Research relating to loss has also revealed that a significant number of individuals report positive changes to their lives following major loss experiences such as the death of a parent. Referred to as posttraumatic growth, the findings suggest bereavement can serve as a catalyst for the development of positive personal change particularly in relation to an individual's sense of self, their relationships with others, and their general outlook on life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). For example, in Schultz's (2007) examination of the influence of mother loss on daughters' identity development, participants described increased independence, empathy,

wisdom, and a greater appreciation for life following their mothers' deaths. Similarly, motherless daughters in Pill and Zabin's (1997) examination of the impact of mother loss described the development of independence, courage, perseverance and compassion. Although the above studies provide an important insight into the experiences of women who have lost their mothers to death, they do not directly address the impact of mother loss on the life of the daughter once she has become a mother herself.

Mireault, Thomas, and Bearor (2002) examined the impact of childhood mother loss on future maternal functioning by comparing 30 American motherless mothers, who had lost their mothers to death prior to the age of 18, with 26 mothers whose mothers were still alive. The researchers utilised telephone interviews to gather demographic details, and mailed questionnaires to gather data relating to maternal identity (as defined by feelings of confidence and competence in the maternal role) and general affect. Quantitative analysis of the data found motherless women felt less competent and confident in the maternal role and experienced greater negative affect than the comparison women. The researchers' findings relating to feelings of confidence and competence are not surprising given the pivotal role maternal grandmothers play in helping daughters adapt positively to the mother role (Cronin, 2003; Mitchell & Green, 2002), however an alternative interpretation is possible in relation to the negative affect experienced by the motherless women. Mireault et al. (2002) acknowledged their findings represented a 'global' assessment of affect - However, they suggested their results indicated a potential vulnerability to depression amongst motherless mothers. Consideration needs to be given to the possibility that the negative affect was caused by a normal grief response to death (Rando, 1993; Silverman, 2000).

Whilst the research of Mireault et al. (2002) highlights the influence a mother's death can have on a daughter's transition to motherhood, it is important to acknowledge that participants in the study were aged 18 years or less at the time of their mother's deaths. According to Edelman (2006), the loss of a mother during childhood or adolescence may present additional challenges for daughters during their transitions to motherhood. The current study sought to describe the everyday, common experiences faced by motherless women in their mother roles, and therefore examined the experiences of women who were mothered throughout their childhood years, however lost their mothers to death prior to having their own children. A review of the literature on mother loss for daughters, and on motherless mothering, raises two main issues. Firstly, prior research has only been conducted in American or Canadian settings and, for motherless mother research specifically, emphasis has been placed on the quantitative exploration of differences between motherless and comparison mothers, rather than richly exploring the everyday experiences that may contribute to the way the motherless mothers feel.

### Aims

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on motherless mothering by: a) providing an in-depth exploration of the influence of premature maternal bereavement on women's everyday experiences of the mother role; and, b) by exploring the motherless mother role within an Australian setting. The research question that guided the present study was "How does the death of a daughter's mother, prior to her having her children, affect her everyday lived experience of the mother role?"

### Method

#### *Research Design*

As research on the lived experiences of motherless mothers is limited, an in-depth qualitative research design, incorporating a phenomenological framework, was used for this study (Creswell, 2007, 2009). Data collection was in the form of semi-structured interviews thus enabling participants to provide detailed accounts of their thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences of motherless motherhood without restriction (Gill & Liamputtong, 2009).

### *Participants*

Ten motherless women with biological children of their own participated in this study. To be included in the study, the women were required to have been maternally bereaved after the age of 18 years and prior to the conception of their eldest child, and their eldest child was to be aged ten years or less. Participants were recruited via flyers, a newspaper article, and the snowball sampling technique (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Participants ranged in age from 34 to 45 years, had between one and four children each, and all were partnered or married. Seven participants described their cultural background as Anglo Australian, one as African Australian, one as English, and one as New Zealander. All the women lost their mothers to illness and all participants described their relationship with their mothers as positive prior to the deaths (See Appendix A for individual demographic details). All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Each interview was conducted in a setting of the participant's choice, and all interviews were conducted by the primary researcher. A brief schedule of open-ended interview questions such as "Since your mother has passed, you have become a mother yourself. Can you tell me about your everyday experiences as a motherless mother?" was used to guide the interview process (Creswell, 2007). Interviews ranged in length from 43 to 95 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim immediately following each interview session.

*Ethical Considerations and Rigour*

Prior to the commencement of each interview participants were given an information letter, and informed consent was obtained in writing. Confidentiality was maintained by changing names and identifying features of participants during the transcription process, and through the deletion of original interview material following transcription. Approval for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University prior to the commencement of the research.

Rigour for this study was maintained through the use of both methodological and interpretative practices. For example, methodological rigour was maintained through the use of a transparent audit trail (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Smith, 2003), and interpretative rigour was maintained through the use of member checking, the independent coding of data by each author (Creswell, 2007, 2009) and direct quotations from participants (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

*Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the preliminary data analysis technique outlined by Grbich (2007) and the four-step thematic analysis process outlined by Green et al. (2007). All analyses were conducted by the primary researcher. Throughout the interview period, notes were made immediately following each interview session relating to the main topics raised by the participant that related to her motherless mother role. These notes then evolved during the transcription process as sections of text relating to the impact of mother loss on the mother role were highlighted and assigned a short notation. This method of 'preliminary analysis' continued throughout the interview period and was a valuable precursor to the thematic analysis process as it enabled the researcher to highlight potential categories as they emerged and ensured the researcher remained engaged with the data (Grbich, 2007).

Once the transcription period was complete, all transcribed interviews were read and re-read to facilitate immersion in both the content and shared context of each individual interview. Transcriptions were considered both individually and concurrently, and segments of text relating to the research topic were assigned a code. Transcriptions were then re-examined to identify groups of codes that could be linked together into meaningful categories. Finally, a process of the linking of categories was undertaken to identify overarching themes relating to the motherless mother experience as a whole (Green et al., 2007). Saturation of data was evident following the eighth interview however transcripts from interviews nine and ten were valuable in providing clarification and confirmation of themes already found (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003).

### Findings and Interpretations

The completed data analysis produced four major themes that reflected the experiences faced by the participants in their everyday lives as motherless mothers: grief, support, absence of knowledge, and changes to self following loss.

#### *Grief*

The first theme to emerge related to the grief experienced by the motherless mothers since their mothers had passed away. In line with modern bereavement theory (Silverman, 2000), nine out of the ten participants described their grief as ongoing. For example, “I don’t think the grieving process will ever stop. . .” (Julia) and “It’s always there. . .” (Tiffany). Furthermore, many participants noted the nature of their grief had changed over time. For example, Elizabeth said “. . . you don’t get over it, but it becomes less acute over time – generally” and Phillippa stated “. . . it does lessen to a certain degree naturally, but it’s still very much there”.

The views expressed here are consistent with modern bereavement literature which suggests that, although mourners may continue to grieve the loss of their loved one over their

lifetime, the process of grieving is unlikely to be continuous beyond the first few weeks or months following the death (Rosenblatt, 1996), with mourners instead learning to adapt to the death over time through finding ways to accommodate the loss into their everyday lives (Rando, 1993; Silverman, 2000).

In accordance with Rando's (1993) research, many of the motherless mothers in this study described periodically experiencing resurgences of grief over their mothers' deaths. For example, Julia said ". . . I think there will always be emotions along the way, something will happen and you'll go 'oh mum, I wish you were here to see this' . . .", whilst Tiffany said "I can have moments where I totally miss mum and I get drawn back down - that's the way I would describe it".

Furthermore, nearly all the motherless mothers described specific occasions that sparked resurgences of grief, such as birthdays or Christmas:

. . . any of those times when family get together like birthdays, or Christmas's, or Easter. Even though it's been so long since mum's passed away you still wish they were there, or you feel like they should be there. . . (Julia)

. . . there will be times where you feel it more, than others - the obvious ones being the birthdays and the Christmas's and all those sorts of things. . . (Phillippa)

For a number of the motherless mothers in this study the birth of their first child, often many years after their mother's death, prompted a new resurgence of grief:

. . . a birth of a baby - that's when it definitely comes back - especially with the three day blues - it hit pretty hard at that stage - and that was a lot to do with not having mum around. (Elizabeth)

. . . there are also stages in your life when you feel the loss more than others, like when I had him [son], there was a sense of loss because, my mum would have been there, she would have loved to have seen him, and been a part of his life. (Tanya)

. . . it reignited when I had kids . . . I'd got myself to a point where I was okay, and then it reignited once I had kids. (Naomi)

These reflections are well supported by research on mother-daughter relationships and mother loss as the transition to motherhood represents a major developmental stage in a daughter's life typically characterised by an increase in mother-daughter connection (Notman, 2006; Pill & Zabin, 1997). According to Rando (1993), the absence of a woman's mother due to death at this important transitional moment is likely to prompt a particularly intense grief response. With this in mind, a number of the motherless mothers noted how their grief reactions had changed since they had become mothers themselves. Specifically, such reactions were often induced by situations or events that highlighted the absence of their mothers in their children's lives, rather than their own:

. . . my daughter went to her assembly the other day and I thought . . . you always see the grandmas come down and watch the kids get certificates and things. . . it's just a shame that there's not that, next generation for my kids to have around. . . (Jackie)

. . . mum and I used to go and watch ballet all the time, she used to make all my costumes, and 'J's [daughter's] first ballet concert was at His Majesty's Theatre which is where my mum and I used to go every single year and watch ballet - and it was just so emotional for me to see my little girl up there, knowing that if mum was here she would have been sitting there - she probably would have made the costume - that sort of thing brings it back. . . (Tiffany).

The absence of their mothers in both the participants' own and their children's lives prompted strong feelings of 'missing out' as mothers without mothers. For example, Jenny said ". . . my children miss out . . . what a shame. My children miss out on my mum's wisdom and knowledge and love and care and nurturing, and I think it's important". Naomi summed up the sense of missing out when she stated "I think I feel that she [mum] just missed out - she's missed out - and my kids have missed out and I've missed out. . ."

As found previously by Edelman (2006), for the women in this study their sense of 'missing out' was threefold; for themselves, missing out on having their mothers around at such an important transitional moment in their lives; for their mothers, missing out on meeting and getting to know their children, and; for their children, missing out on the experience of having a maternal grandmother in their lives.

In addition to acknowledging grieving as an ongoing, cyclical process (Silverman, 2000), modern bereavement literature recognises the importance of the bereaved maintaining connections to the deceased as a normal component of healthy mourning (Klass & Walter, 2001; Silverman, 2000; Worden, 2008). Despite the physical absence of their mothers, many of the motherless mothers in this study described ways in which they were able to maintain a connection to their mother and thus keep the memories of their mother alive within their current family unit, such as traditions they had established with their children that they had originally undertaken with their own mothers. For example, Tiffany said:

I do cooking with the girls 'cause I remember mum doing cooking with us. I'll probably try and show them how to sew when they get a bit older 'cause mum used to do that with me all the time, she was excellent at stuff like that. . .

A number of the participants kept the memories of their mothers' alive by introducing them into their children's lives through the use of photographs, personal items and stories:

. . . every now and again we'll look through the albums or at something of mums that I've got, and I'll say 'that was my mum's, and I must look after it', and they [children] say 'where is she' and I say 'well, she's died' . . . (Denise)

. . . usually stories . . . one night I was lying in bed with my daughter and I was telling her 'you know my mum used to do this with me, your grandma', we just call her grandma in heaven. . . (Jackie)

Vickio (1999) describes how the continuation of bonds with deceased loved ones can be achieved a number of ways, including the recognition of personal mannerisms, beliefs, gestures and attitudes shared with the deceased; choosing to continue a pursuit or activity that was enjoyed by the deceased; embracing personal items, photographs or other symbolic reminders of the loved one, or the reviewing of the loved one's life story. The views expressed by the motherless mothers not only indicate the types of strategies utilised to maintain a connection to their deceased mothers, but also reveal the desire of the participants to keep the memories of their mothers alive within their current family units.

The desire for the women to maintain a connection to their deceased mothers is not surprising when considered in relation to research on the nature of mother-daughter relationships and female identity development. Mother-daughter relationships are often characterised by emotional closeness, and shared values and experiences (Holdsworth, 2007; Martell, 1990; Sutor & Pillemer, 2006), and research suggests a woman's identity evolves from within the context of her attachment relationship to her mother and continues to develop in contrast to and comparison with her mother's personality and character throughout her life (Chodorow, 1978;

Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001; Schultz, 2007). For the motherless mothers in this study, although the death had taken away the possibility of a living relationship with their mother, the continuation of traditions, personal possessions and stories enabled them to continue to identify with their mothers as they carried on with their lives.

### *Support*

The second major theme described by the participants related to support in their mother roles. More specifically, the participants' reflected on the absence of their mothers as sources of support and the alternate sources of support available to them. Past research on childrearing has highlighted the importance of an additional source of support when raising children (Nystrom & Ohrling, 2004) and the pivotal role maternal grandmothers play as sources of both practical and emotional support for their daughters when the daughters become mothers themselves (Cronin, 2003; Mitchell & Green, 2002). For eight out of the ten participants in this study, the absence of their mother as a source of support was a notable component of their everyday mother roles. For example, Julia described the absence of her mother as “. . . the hard[est] thing I think, ‘cause mum would have been on the doorstep. . .”, and Tanya agreed with “. . . my mother would have just been [pause], I would have had to lock the door to keep her out, you know what I mean”.

The participants emphasised how they felt the support provided by mothers differed from other sources of support:

. . . just ringing up and saying ‘I can’t do this’ or when you have a really bad day . . . I have friends, and I have a really good mother-in-law. . . but sometimes there’s only some things that you can tell your mother . . . you say ‘I’m just having a really bad day’ and you know that they’ll come up and they won’t judge you. . . (Denise)

... the ladies at my mother's group have mums that, they'll go to the Gym and leave their children with their mother, or will get their hair done or something like that, and they just say 'mum, can you look after [child's name]' - I don't have that...(Tanya)

I guess the most obvious is they [other mothers] have that help 'in an instant' kind of thing, where they've got someone that they can pick up the phone and go 'mum, I'm struggling, I need help' . . . [plus] . . . I think I would feel much less obliged to people for asking for help - I feel I could ring my mum anytime and say 'mum, I need you to come' whereas if I ask anyone else . . . I feel like I have to repay the favour . . . (Jackie)

As mother-daughter relationships are often defined by emotional closeness, support, shared values, and regularly shared activities and experiences (Fingerman, 2000; Holdsworth, 2007; Martell, 1990; Sutor & Pillemer, 2006) it is understandable the participants described missing out on every day, informal aspects of support they felt were unique to mother-daughter connection. Interestingly, these assertions are consistent with several studies including Mitchell and Green (2002) who highlighted babysitting at 'short notice' as a significant means through which maternal grandmothers helped their daughters cope with the mother role; Cronin (2003), who found maternal grandmothers were central in providing incidental care for their grandchildren so their daughters' could have 'time out' for themselves; and Razurel et al. (2011), who identified daily life hassles as being associated with more stress for mothers than major life events.

In the absence of their mothers' support, participants in the study sought alternate sources of support to help them with their mother roles. For eight out of the ten participants, the alternate support person was their sister or maternal aunt. For example, Diane stated "I'm very lucky that I've got one sister who is just so wonderful, in lots of ways I'm very lucky to have her, she's

filled a hole that a lot of people wouldn't have"; Jackie commented ". . . she [maternal aunt] kind of felt like she wanted to be a surrogate grandma and that was great. . ." and Julia elaborated with:

I think my sister became that person. . . .she's taken on that, grandmother type of role. . . she babysits, she has them for sleepovers, she'll take them out shopping, all those sort of things . . . she's quite a motherly figure for me now . . . . probably doing the same sort of thing as my mum would do . . .

The above comments indicate how, in the absence of their mothers, sisters and/or maternal aunts had become pivotal sources of support for the participants in their everyday mother roles. These findings are supported by literature relating to female kinship networks which describe the networks of support, assistance and ongoing communication that exist between mothers, grandmothers, daughters and grand-daughters within families, as well as sisters, nieces, aunts and female cousins (Brown & DeRycke, 2010). According to Edelman (1994), the strongest female kinship networks within families exist between members of the maternal line of descent, often referred to as the Motherline. For the majority of women in this study the significance of connection to their Motherline is evident as, in the absence of their own mothers as sources of support, they embraced wholeheartedly the support offered to them from the women closest to them on their mother's side – their sisters and/or maternal aunts.

#### *Absence of Knowledge*

The third major theme to emerge from the data was described by the participants as an absence of knowledge. More specifically the motherless mothers described how, since their mothers' deaths, they were no longer able to access certain pieces of information about themselves, their mothers, and their families. For example, a number of participants described

being unable to find information relating to the history of their family. Jenny elaborated on this by saying “. . . the family tree, you know, ‘who was Gran’s mum’s dad?’ or ‘what did she used to do?’ I don’t know a lot of that because mum’s not here to ask. . .”

For other participants, details of their medical history, or the medical histories of their family members, were unable to be ascertained. For example, Jackie said “I don’t know so much about medical history. I had to have a blood test to see if I’d had chicken pox because nobody knew. . .”, and Phillippa stated “I’m wondering myself did she ever have post natal depression, or . . . if there’s any real cancer history in our family - I don’t really know”.

The reflections of the participants are supported by family literature whereby mothers are highlighted as the ‘keepers’ of information within families, often retaining knowledge relating to biological and psychosocial events, dating back both within their immediate family units and also to past generations (Edelman, 1994; Rando, 1988). When mothers die, much of this information is lost, and surviving family members are left deprived not only of a unique form of documentation of their family’s history, but also of un-remembered parts of their own lives (Rando, 1988). With this in mind, a number of the motherless mothers further described wishing they had access to information about themselves and their childhoods that they could no longer remember, and recalled how they had missed being able to ask their mothers for information relating to their mothers pregnancies and birth experiences when they were pregnant themselves:

. . . it would have been just great to have good talks with her about, what we were like, and what the births were like and, how she was when we were young . . .because I never really got to speak to her about that sort of thing (Elizabeth)

I suppose being able to ask questions about what I was like . . . one of the things that concerns me with my son is that he’s quite thin, and I want to know, what was I like as a

baby? Was I thin? . . . the doctors and nurses tell me that he's normal, but I start worrying as he seems so skinny to me and they always ask 'well, what were you like as a baby?', and I have no idea. . . (Tanya)

These views are consistent with the research of Franceschi (2004), who also found motherless mothers missed having information relating to their mothers' pregnancies during their transitions to motherhood. According to Edelman (1994), daughters seek out information relating to their mother's pregnancies and births when they become pregnant themselves, as mothers represent a direct link between daughters and their feminine line of descent, or 'Motherline'. When daughters lose their mothers to death, not only do they lose the narrative of their personal and family histories, but they also lose access to important historical information relating to their feminine roots, including information relating to pregnancy and childrearing (Edelman, 1994; Rando, 1993).

An overall finding that emerged from the motherless mothers in relation to the absence of knowledge was their inability to be able to ask simple, every day questions that they felt could only be asked of a mother. For example, Denise described not being able to ask ". . . dumb questions, you know that person that you can ask dumb questions to and they're not going to judge you. . ." and Naomi elaborated with:

. . . just, little things, you know, how to make soup properly . . . I call them one-percenters. . . it would be a range of things, but often [it's] the really little things that you feel stupid about ringing anyone else about. . . [and]. . . sometimes you have weird little questions that you just need answers [to], and you don't want to interrupt anyone else's life, but you know that if your mum was around, she'd stop. . .

These reflections are not surprising when considered in relation to literature describing the unique nature of mother-daughter relationships (Holdsworth, 2007; Martell, 1990; Suito & Pillemer, 2006), and complement the theme of ‘absence of mother as a source of support’, whereby participants described missing out on every day, informal aspects of support they felt were unique to mother-daughter connections.

#### *Changes to Self Following Mother Loss*

The fourth major theme to emerge from the data related to the ways in which the participants felt their mothers’ deaths had impacted on their sense of personal identity. For a number of participants, this resulted in them having to ‘grow up’ almost overnight. For example, Naomi said “I just feel, before, I was a different person, then . . . you’re no longer innocent after that happens, you’ve got to grow up pretty quick. . .”. Diane elaborated with:

I think when your mum dies, you’ve got to be a grown up, like I see my husband go to his mum’s and just sloth on the couch. . . . and his mum runs around and gets him coffees and, I just think ‘you come home and you’re a kid again’ . . . I’ve never got that. . . . No one looks after you anymore.

These findings are supported by the research of Schultz (2007) and Franceschi (2004) who both found mother loss changed the way motherless participants felt about themselves. Franceschi (2004) also reported that women felt that they had had to ‘grow up’ when their mothers died. In addition, the reflections of the participants are also supported by literature relating to mother-daughter relationships and female identity development, where mother-daughter relationships are characterised by emotional closeness, and shared values and experiences (Holdsworth, 2007; Martell, 1990; Suito & Pillemer, 2006) and research suggests a daughter’s identity evolves from within the context of her attachment relationship to her mother

(Chodorow, 1978; Samuolis et al., 2001; Schultz, 2007). When a mother-daughter attachment relationship is broken prematurely by the death of the mother, it is understandable the daughter's evolving sense of self is affected (Pill & Zabin, 1997). According to Rando (1993), when a mother dies her daughter has to redefine her sense of self to accommodate the fact that there is no longer a mother to be a daughter to. This, in turn, can result in the daughter feeling as though she has reached adult status, virtually overnight, as often with her mother's death she has lost the primary person to whom she was a child.

Bereavement literature indicates that the experience of major loss (such as the death of a parent) can result in the bereaved developing a heightened awareness of the transitory nature of life and a realisation that death is an inevitable reality (Rando, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1996). These feelings were reflected by a number of the motherless mothers in this study:

. . . my mum's death has made me feel - a little bit more conscious of death, and I get a little bit, I don't know if the word paranoid's appropriate, but I certainly think about it more often than I should. . . (Tanya)

I have probably a bigger sense of morbidity than anyone else that I know, 'cause I've experienced that side of things, and I've got a bigger awareness of dying and the hole that it leaves in people's lives. . . (Naomi)

Mothers' deaths can lead to daughters feeling vulnerable over their own mortality, particularly if the mother's death was the result of an inheritable disease (Edelman, 2006). Furthermore, when motherless daughters have children of their own, death anxiety can be enhanced by the thought of their own premature deaths and their children having to experience what they experienced as a result of their motherloss. Both Zall (1994) and Franceschi (2004)

found motherless mothers worried about their own mortality and leaving their children without a mother to care for them.

In contrast to the negative changes to self described above, a number of participants in this study described positive changes to their personal identities that had occurred as a result of their mothers' deaths:

Oh, I'm definitely stronger now. . . .I remember a girl at school, she was only. . .17, when her mum died of cancer, and. . . .I remember saying. . . . 'there's no way, I could never, ever, survive that', and a few years later, that was me, and I thought, you know, you can (Diane)

. . . obviously you don't want to lose your mother but I've found going through that has made me a stronger person . . .[it] has made me a better mother than I probably would've been . . .[and] has given me a lot more focus. . . (Tiffany)

. . . it definitely has made me stronger. . . .I think, because I didn't have mum to run to, or dad for that matter, so for every little thing, I sort of had to work things out for myself. . . (Phillippa)

These views are supported by the research of Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) who suggest positive change following loss typically occurs in relation to the mourners' sense of self, their relationships with others and in their general outlook on life. The positive changes described are consistent with the findings of previous studies. For example, motherless daughters have described how the death of their mothers has resulted in feelings of independence, wisdom and a greater appreciation for life (Schultz, 2007); and also courage, perseverance and coping skills (Pill & Zabin, 1997). According to Rando (1993), the ability of the bereaved to be able to identify positive personal change following major loss does not mean the bereaved will no longer

grieve the death of their loved ones; however it does suggest they have reached a point where they have learned to live with their losses in a way that does not inhibit the healthy continuation of their lives.

### Conclusion

Collectively, the findings of this study support those of prior researchers (Edelman, 1994, 2006; Mireault et al., 2002; Pill & Zabin, 1997; Schultz, 2007) by highlighting the ongoing influence a mother's death can have on a daughter's life, and by drawing distinction to specific issues faced by motherless daughters when they have children of their own. In addition, the results of this research contribute to the growing body of literature on motherless mothering by acknowledging and describing the lived experiences of motherless mothers within an Australian setting.

The following limitations of the study design need to be acknowledged. Firstly, mother loss literature highlights a number of extraneous variables, such as the age of the daughter when her mother died or the cause of the mother's death, which may impact how a bereaved daughter adapts to her mother's death (Mireault et al., 2002). Therefore it cannot be assumed these variables did not influence the ways in which the participants experienced their motherless mother roles. Secondly, an important component of qualitative research is the involvement of the researcher as part of the research process. The researcher's interpretation of themes identified highlights the co-constructive nature of qualitative research and thus the findings of this study reflect one version of reality and may be interpreted differently by others (Smith, 2003).

The findings from this study have implications for clinicians and others working with women who have experienced premature mother loss and are entering or experiencing motherhood. Firstly, knowledge gained from this study will be valuable in increasing

professional sensitivity and awareness of issues associated with the motherless mother role. Secondly, many of the participants commented on the positive effects of the interview process and how the opportunity to share their stories enabled them to gain further insight and understanding relating to their loss experiences. This suggests a clear role for clinicians to encourage maternally bereaved women to talk about their mother loss experiences and has implications for the potential benefits of educational sessions or support groups for women entering or experiencing the motherless mother role (Razurel et al., 2011). Lastly, while the findings of the current study contribute to the growing body of knowledge relating to the motherless mother role, there are many aspects of the phenomenon that are not known or understood. For example, mother loss literature acknowledges a number of variables can contribute to the way in which a bereaved daughter adapts to her mother's death (Mireault et al., 2002) and most likely her transition to the mother role. It was noted that seven out of the ten participants in this study identified themselves as the youngest sibling and therefore had never experienced, first-hand, their mothers being pregnant or caring for a new-born. As such, a comparison of sisters' experiences in the motherless mother role would be beneficial in supporting and extending the current knowledge relating to issues motherless women face when entering and experiencing the mother role.

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## Appendix A

### Participant Details

Table A1

*Summary of Participant Details*

Name	Age	Siblings	Position in Family	Number of Children	Age of Children	Participant Age When Mother Passed	Cause of Mother's Death	Cultural Background
Diane	39	2 sisters	Eldest	4	8, 6, 4, 12 weeks	24	Cancer	Anglo Australian
Jackie	34	2 sisters	Middle	3	6, 4, 1	25	Cancer	Anglo Australian
Phillippa	44	3 sisters, 2 brothers	Youngest	2	10, 6	19	Emphysema	New Zealander
Denise	45	2 sisters, 1 brother	Youngest	2	6, 4	33	Cancer	Anglo Australian
Naomi	35	1 sister	Youngest	2	6, 3	18	Cancer	Anglo Australian
Tiffany	38	1 brother	Youngest	2	4, 5 ½	30	Cancer	African Australian
Tanya	37	2 sisters, 1 brother	Youngest	1	9 months	18	Cancer	Anglo Australian
Elizabeth	34	1 brother, 1 sister	Youngest	1	5 months	23	Cancer	Anglo Australian
Julia	38	1 brother, 1 sister	Youngest	2	5, 2	32	Heart Failure	English
Jenny	41	2 sisters, 1 brother	Eldest	2	4, 2	25	Cancer	Anglo Australian