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DISTAL SIBLING GRIEF: EXPLORING EMOTIONAL AFFECT AND SALIENCE OF LISTENER BEHAVIORS IN STORIES OF SIBLING DEATH

Margaret C. Brock
University of Montana, Missoula

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By

MARGARET CONARROE BROCK

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Dr. Christina Yoshimura, Chair
Department of Communication Studies

Dr. Steve Yoshimura
Department of Communication Studies

Dr. Kirsten Murray
Department of Counseling

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ABSTRACT

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Distal Sibling Grief and Emotional Affect

Chairperson: Dr. Christina Yoshimura

Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) theory is used as a theoretical framework to understand the storytelling surrounding a sibling's death years after the loss. Analysis of 174 narratives from individuals whose siblings died five or more years ago revealed that a neutral tone, rather than the use of positive or negative affect, was predominant in this retrospective storytelling. When affect was present, it was more likely to be negative than positive. However, positive affect was associated with an individual's satisfaction with life when it was present. The neutrality and frequency of retrospective storytelling among distally bereaved siblings in this study may indicate that over time, siblings evidence their sensemaking in stories through reduction of affect and the presentation of facts.

Additionally, the participants' reported salience of the six different CNSM perspective-taking behaviors of listeners while telling the death story to others suggests that all six perspective-taking behaviors are important to their decision to share their story. However, being offered the space and freedom to tell the story emerged as the most important listener behavior of the participants in this study. Based on these findings, the potential to create CNSM translational interventions for bereaved siblings is discussed

Death occurs every day, but it is often difficult to accept. The deaths of friends and family members are unavoidable, and the surviving loved ones react to the loss through the processes of grief. Grief may change a person's identity (Archer, 1999; Brinkmann, 2020), other relationships (Carmon et al., 2010), communication (Basinger et al., 2016; Cohen & Samp, 2018), and interactions with the world. In American culture, open communication about grief is often considered taboo (Gilrain, 2005), leading to bereaved populations feeling isolated and disenfranchised due to their inability to authentically express their grief (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020). Bereaved adult siblings in particular, struggle to cope with the death of a sibling, as they often feel uniquely alone in their grief and permanently changed from the experience (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). However, working to connect with others through the process of grief is beneficial (Pangborn, 2019). Communication via storytelling to supportive others plays a significant role in a bereaved person's ability to make sense of the event, the death, and their own life since the loss of the loved one (Holman & Horstman, 2019; Pangborn, 2019). Stories help us understand what has happened in our lives and how we move forward with what we have learned (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Being able to openly and authentically articulate events and emotions through storytelling may help the bereaved forge meaning out of the loss and make sense of life and death (Pangborn, 2019).

The present research aims at understanding critical elements of bereaved siblings' narratives to inform future translational interventions (i.e., building storytelling and storywitnessing opportunities) for bereaved siblings using the process of retrospective storytelling. The research aspires to understand how distally bereaved siblings (i.e., adults who experienced the death of a sibling five or more years ago) reflect on their sibling's death through

storytelling, if and how that process is associated with life satisfaction, and which perspective-taking behaviors from a listener matter to them in telling the story of their sibling's death.

Review of Literature

The following review gives an overview of grief and bereavement from communication psychological views, particularly evidencing how communication within and around a family unit may change when a family member dies. Next, the review examines sibling grief specifically, focusing on the unique bond and grief associated with the sibling relationship. Finally, a review of Communicated Narrative Sense-Making Theory is presented as theoretical grounding for the research.

Overview of Grief and Bereavement

Gilrain (2005) describes bereavement as "the time period during which one exhibits grief expressions" (p. 5). While grief is the emotion itself, often described as one of the foundational human emotions (Brinkmann, 2020), grief has also been described as a simple equation of love + loss (Brinkmann, 2020). This equation suggests that grief is expected, as humans love many impermanent things. Grief indicates that humans are mortal and social beings (Brinkmann, 2020), and feeling grief means love was felt first. While grief and bereavement are often looked at from a psychological lens, grief reactions "are manifest and negotiated through communication, primarily through communication within family units and subunits" (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 274). Grief itself is a social process. The grief expressions that occur during the ongoing bereavement period are often to, with, and for other people (Brinkmann & Kofod, 2017; Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Communication and connection to others after the death of a loved one may help to rebuild a sense of balance in interpersonal relationships (Rossetto, 2015).

Expressions of grief may be long-lasting (Basinger et al., 2016; Brinkmann, 2020; Gilrain, 2005; Moules et al., 2004). Some researchers argue that grief does not end but instead shifts as time passes (Brinkmann, 2020, Gilrain, 2005, Neimeyer et al., 2011). The present paper aligns with these researchers and argues that because grief does not end and bereavement is the time a person experiences and expresses grief, bereavement also does not end. A person who lost a family member or loved one decades ago may still exhibit grief reactions and expressions when prompted or stimulated (Brinkmann, 2020; Moules et al., 2004; Neimeyer et al., 2011).

Expressions of grief will vary from culture to culture (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Brinkmann, 2020), family to family (Rossetto, 2015), and person to person (Stroebe et al., 2005), but common grief reactions and expressions include verbal and physical actions such as: wailing, crying, wearing specific colors, outbursts of physical aggression, and anger, bad posture or slumping over, and disruptions in sleep and eating habits (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Brinkmann & Koford, 2017). Grief can be an active process filled with individual choices regarding expression of emotions and thoughts (Attig, 1991).

One choice of grief expression is storytelling (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Pangborn, 2019). Bereaved people tell stories about their dead loved one, the death, and other experiences surrounding the experience of grief. These stories help the bereaved make sense of what they lost and help people express emotions in a beneficial way (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Stories told to others in grief expressions may also boost social support and well-being (Pangborn, 2019).

Expressions of grief during bereavement will vary depending on the relationship with the deceased (Cohen & Samp, 2018; Neimeyer et al., 2002)). A teenager who loses their parent and depends on them financially will have a different grief reaction than a parent who loses their teenager. The loss of a sibling is different from losing a child or parent. These varied reactions

can occur within a single family, as each family member loses a different and unique relationship.

Communication and Grieving Families

Although grief occurs in the context of many different types of relationships, the loss of a family member uniquely changes the lives of those who are left to grieve (Brinkmann, 2020). The bereaved often have to renegotiate their identities and roles as they navigate life without a family member who has served as a relational anchor. For example, when a husband's wife dies, he loses the active designation of "husband" and is referred to as "widower" (Neimyer et al. 2002). When a person loses their only sibling, they become an only child. A parent loses a subject of their parenting when their child dies. Humans define who they are in relation to others and when a family member dies, key roles and self-identifiers shift (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005).

The death of a family member can disrupt the way surviving family members communicate with one another and with the outside world. Basinger and colleagues (2016) interviewed college students who had lost a sibling or parent. Their participants indicated they were very selective to whom they disclosed information about the death or their grief. They discussed how important privacy was to them and how they regulated their expressions of grief depending on who was listening. These college students often avoided disclosure about the death of their parent or sibling unless explicitly asked. They also preferred to discuss the details and emotions with close friends or others who had similar experiences. Participants also talked about how they felt pressure only to discuss positive things about their dead loved one. Expressions of negativity were seen as taboo and violated social norms, often making the listener seem uncomfortable and inhibiting authentic storytelling and disclosure.

Bosticco and Thompson (2005) reviewed research on bereaved families' storytelling and found that family members often experience different grief reactions at different times, which is expected as grief is unique to the individual. They argue that talking about the loss and grief helps individual family members feel less isolated. Their review indicated that supportive communication within the family unit evokes honest expressions of grief which can be helpful for individuals and the family as a whole. Their research also explores how society deems grief stories as taboo, preventing open or frequent disclosure of the loss.

Rossetto (2015) conducted interviews with bereaved parents after the death of a child to understand the types of communication strategies these parents were using to support their surviving children. Direct conversations between parents and surviving children helped to promote storytelling and, in turn, promoted meaning-making, encouragement, expressions of feelings and emotions, and connection to the dead sibling. Rossetto's research found that parents conceal their feelings and avoid direct conversations to support their children by repressing negative emotions. Bereaved parents reported struggling between supporting their surviving children and needing support themselves. Another key finding in this research was the interdependent nature of coping strategies and grief reactions; parents who used direct communication and supportive strategies felt more successful in assisting their surviving children through the grief. Supportive techniques that promoted meaning and sense-making for the children, in turn, benefitted the parents.

This research highlights how communicating expressions of grief to others can be a tumultuous experience. The bereaved often feel social pressure to avoid the topic or tailor the communication around the listener's comfort, even within their own families. Outsiders may

avoid the subject out of uncertainty regarding how to approach the issue, creating a culture where grieving people do not have the freedom to open up about their loss(es).

Each surviving family member is grieving their own positional relationship with the deceased and thus, is likely to have different reactions, needs, and coping mechanisms. Surviving siblings lose a different relationship than their parents, and because of this, their grief is distinct (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Surviving siblings often feel like they need to hide their grief and be supportive and strong for their others (Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Horsley & Patterson, 2006; Rossetto, 2015), yet their loss is no less significant than other family members and deserves specific focus.

An Overview of Sibling Loss

Due to the permanent and ascribed nature of the relationship, sibling bonds are unique (Cicirelli, 1995; Fowler, 2009; Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Packman et al., 2006; Rittenour et al., 2007). Siblings do not choose each other, nor can they control when the relationship ends. Siblings often share childhood experiences, genetics, and memories through biology, adoption, or blending of families. Siblings are often lifelong friends (Cicirelli, 1995), tend to depend on each other in old age (Fowler, 2009), and often consider themselves constant allies with shared experiences (Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Rittenour et al., 2007). Due to the distinctive nature of sibling relationships, the grief experienced by a surviving sibling is also unique.

Parental and spousal loss often overshadow sibling loss (Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Packmen et al., 2006), and thus, it is understudied within the communication field (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). The death of a sibling ends an anticipated lifelong relationship, which can impact the surviving siblings in various and detrimental ways (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). The age of the surviving sibling is one factor that influences the grief reaction and how the sibling is

able to cope and move forward (Thai & Moore, 2018). As a child grows, their awareness and emotional capacities grow, potentially expanding their abilities to understand and process the event.

Sibling loss and childhood grief

Death is a complex part of the human condition, and children often struggle to process the death of a loved one. Young children often do not have the cognitive capacity to understand death. This lack of understanding potentially perpetuates and prolongs the grief reaction (Thai & Moore, 2018). Children and teenagers grieve differently than adults and often feel unsupported by their peers (Thai & Moore, 2018), mainly because their peers are also young and therefore are often unable to comprehend death and grief. The experience of losing a sibling at a young age is a different experience than the developmental norm, and this may cause bereaved children to feel disconnected from their peers.

Grief can be isolating and lonely for everyone, but especially for children. When a sibling dies during childhood, the surviving child loses a playmate, friend, and companion they thought they would have for life (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005). Surviving siblings feel isolated in their grief as they struggle to find peers who can relate (Pangborn, 2019). Bereaved children may choose to conceal their grief (Pangborn, 2019) out of the assumption they need to stay strong for their parents (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). Because parents' coping mechanisms, communication, and reactions influence how the surviving children process and express their own grief Rossetto, 2015), parents who use maladaptive coping mechanisms (i.e., avoidance, substance abuse, withdrawal) sometimes have children who adopt that behavior in turn, which can further isolate a child in their bereavement process. While avoidance can sometimes be effective and necessary, withdrawal and denial can come from avoidance which separates a child

from reality. These maladaptive behaviors can alienate a child from their peers, families, or supportive others as they retreat from their emotions.

Children still grieve and process their loss through communication and actions despite their age and cognitive abilities. Even when their life is short, a sibling is an integral part of a family, and the loss of that sibling can be devastating to the surviving children. Willer et al. (2018) examined how children aged zero to 18 processed the loss of a baby sibling and found that even when an infant dies, the surviving "children are expected to reimagine their lives without a family member, including what the plotline might entail and who they are in relation to a dead baby and grieving parents" (p. 155). Willer and colleagues analyzed unprompted visual narratives (drawings) from a grief support organization created by anonymous surviving siblings. Themes emerged that suggest bereaved children actively process the death itself and the identity of their dead baby siblings along with their own identities concerning the death through drawn images and written words. Their participants sketched scenes involving their memories of the death or days preceding it, pictures of their current life and living family members, and images of the dead sibling as an angel or entity still present in some capacity. These drawings illustrate how even though children may not be able to process the experience verbally, they are emotionally experiencing a profound event.

As children age, reactions to grief may change. Teens, for example, may resist the process of active grief (Attig, 1991; Pangborn, 2019). Pangborn (2019) found that the teenagers at a bereavement camp "were initially hesitant to share anything about themselves that would make them vulnerable to the group" (p. 95). Their grief reactions to their sibling losses had not been supported or understood by their peers (Thai & Moore, 2018), and the teens were unfamiliar with being with others who could relate to their pain. As the camp continued,

Pangborn (2019) noticed that the teens started to take actions to enjoy camp once they were free to be themselves in their grief. Activities and actions such as art, photography, storytelling, hiking, and other forms of play helped these teens connected to one another and to their grief in a way that helped them make sense of their losses. The teens found refuge in each other, they validated each other's experiences and in turn were able to validate their own experience. The participants in Pangborn's (219) research became role models for one another, helping to foster continued positive relationships with the deceased, while also recognizing that their lives would continue to move forward. The teens started making sense of the death and their grief by sharing their expressions with supportive and similar others (Thoits, 2011). These findings support Rossetto's (2015) to suggest that bereaved children benefit from role models who share grief experiences and facilitate and encourage open communication and expressions of grief.

Sibling Grief in Adulthood

While adults may have more cognitive and emotional capacity to cope with loss, the death of a sibling during adulthood, rather than childhood, can still significantly impact the surviving sibling's identity, life, communication, relationships, mental health, and well-being. Limited research exists on how adults cope with the death of a sibling (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). Many studies focus on the grief that contributes to the loss of a parent, spouse, or child (Thai & Moore, 2018). However, scholarship is starting to note how adults often have complicated or traumatic grief and "unique challenges to coping" (Halliwell & Franken, 2016, p. 338), especially when they lose a sibling, due to the intimate nature of the relationship (Brock, 2022; Thai & Moore, 2018).

Halliwell and Franken (2016) studied online narratives of bereaved adult siblings who had lost their sibling within the last five years and found that bereaved adult siblings struggle to

balance the tension of *grieving as a deviant behavior* in society and as *a normal human process*. A deviant behavior goes against social norms, and grief can often be stigmatized and unsupported (Barney & Yoshimura, 2020). "The finding that many surviving siblings reported feeling unsupported by family and friends demonstrates that sibling grief is, in fact, often "invisible" to others" (Halliwell & Franken, p. 350). Like bereaved siblings in childhood, adults also feel isolated in their grief and often do not know whom to confide in or how to express their grief in an acceptable way to their peers, colleagues, and families.

Brock (2022) examined sibling online grief stories looking for the explicit expression of gratitude. Her work illustrates that even amid the sorrow, positive experiences and emotions may be present in sibling grief stories. Brock's (2022) research noted that some bereaved siblings found things to be grateful for within their bereavement process. While expressions of gratitude were not the majority or even the norm, Brock (2022) argues that bereaved siblings who read stories written by other bereaved siblings that incorporate positive emotions may learn how to reframe their experiences and incorporate positive emotions into their own stories.

Even though adult bereaved siblings sometimes struggle to express their grief to supportive others actively, bereaved siblings still report that they experience personal growth and new forged meaning (Forward & Garlie, 2003; Neimeyer et al., 2002) and greater purpose in life (Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Pangborn, 2019) following the death of their sibling. These positive outcomes and perspectives often come with time (Basinger et al., 2016; Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Tonkins & Lambert, 1996) and open and supportive communication with others (Basinger et al., 2016; Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Cohen & Samp, 2018; Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Packman et al., 2006, Pangborn, 2019; Rossetto, 2015; Thai & Moore, 2018). Communication is an integral part of the grieving process as it is through communication with others that people

make meaning and sense out of their realities (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). Being able to make sense of an event, especially a traumatic one like the death of a sibling, comes from being able to talk about it openly with supportive others (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Holman & Horstman, 2019; Koenig Kellas, 2010; Koenig Kellas et al., 2015; Koenig Kellas, 2018). Open communication about loss and grief can often take the form of a story written down or told to others. In telling a story to supportive others, a person can actively and honestly narrate the experience, promoting sense-making.

Communicative Narrative Sense-Making Theory

Telling stories helps humans make sense of their lives and the events surrounding them. It can desensitize the person to the disorientation or overwhelm associated with the experience by cognitively processing the event aloud through incorporating and ordering details into their current life and reality (Koenig Kellas et al., 2015). By telling and retelling a story, a person becomes the protagonist of their own story. They can shape the story's progression, characters, and ending. This process of storytelling helps in the forging of meaning (Neimeyer et al., 2002, 2011) and may assist in the development of a life that makes sense (Abams, 2001; Cohen & Samp, 2018; Koenig Kellas, 2018), even in the wake of a traumatic event, such as the death of a sibling (Halliwell & Franken, 2016). Communicated Narrative Sense-Making Theory (CNSM) expands on this belief, arguing that storytelling is an integral part of how humans directly make sense of a traumatic event through storytelling.

CNSM helps bring structure to the bereavement process by focusing on communication (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Of course, previous grief scholarship has included a focus on how the bereaved choose to communicate (or not) about their grief to families and others through written and spoken narrative, disclosure, and cognitive processing (Abrams, 2001; Archer, 1999; 2008;

Attig, 2004; 1991; Brinkmann, 2020; Dufrechou, 2004; Forward & Garlie, 2004; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Gilrain, 2005; Grove, 2004; Holland et al. 2006; Lewandowski et al., 2006; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2002; Packman et al., 2006; Thompson, 2007). The theoretical lenses of communication privacy management theory (Basinger et al., 2016), family communication patterns (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Carmon et al., 2010), dialectics of grief (Halliwell & Franken, 2016; Toller, 2005) and the narrative process (Willer et al. 2018) have all been utilized. However, only recently have grief communication scholars started to bring Communicated Narrative Sense-Making theory (CNSM) into the realm of grief (Barney & Yoshimura, 2021; Brock, 2022; Holman & Horstman, 2019; Horstman & Holman, 2018; Pangborn, 2019). CNSM expands on interdisciplinary knowledge of narratives and disclosure by combining the processes of storytelling, human interaction and communication, and the way humans make sense of their lives through co-constructing meaning with others.

CNSM strives to understand how, where, and why storytelling happens. It examines how storytelling functions with sense-making and human well-being (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Grief psychology, grief work, and counseling emphasize the importance of working through trauma to reestablish well-being after the event, and "CNSM puts communication at the heart of understanding the links between narratives and health by defining storytelling as the communicative manifestation of narrative sense-making" (Koenig Kellas, 2018, p. 63). The way people tell stories connects to their social, psychological, and physical well-being. The types of stories they tell influence the way they are able to make sense and meaning out of an event.

Heuristics and Types of Stories

CNSM acknowledges narrative as a form of communication that has direct links to health and well-being and that storytelling functions as a way for people to process and make sense of

their lives (Koenig Kellas, 2018). According to Koenig Kellas (2018), there are three main heuristics in CNSM storytelling and sense-making: *retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling,* and *translational storytelling.* These three heuristics and the seven propositions (see Table 1) help frame different approaches to researching how people tell stories and the implications of those stories, their contexts, the tellers, and the listeners. The present study focuses on all three heuristics of storytelling to connect the current research to developing translational storytelling interventions in future work.

The first heuristic, retrospective storytelling (the stories we tell and hear), contains two of the seven propositions that Koenig Kellas (2018) created within CNSM. Proposition one states, "*The content of retrospective storytelling reveals individual, relational, and intergenerational meaning-making, values, and beliefs"* (p. 65). Focusing on the story's themes, content, and storyline, the information within the story carries weight and meaning that is constructed and re-constructed between the storyteller and the listeners. The characters, scene, event, and ending are processed each time the story is told, and this practice helps to create meaning and sense-making through cognitively processing the story. Proposition two focuses on the story's tone, "*Retrospective storytelling content that is framed positively (e.g., redemptively, prosocially, affectively positive, characterized by high levels of agency, coherently) will be positively related to individual and relational health and well-being."* (p. 66). Evidence suggests that the affective content of a story reveals the internal cognitive processing about how an event unfolded and its impact on the individual.

Holman and Horstman (2019) explored three different narratives sequences in their research on spouses' stories about an experienced miscarriage. They found there are *redemptive stories*- stories that start negatively but where "storytellers recognize the good that comes out of

a difficult situation" (p. 296), *contaminated stories*- which contain "themes of stress, misfortune, and negativity" throughout the story (p. 296), and *ambivalent stories*- stories that are neither redemptive nor contaminated and lack emotional, subjective views on the event. A growing body of research has established that positive and redemptive stories (e.g., stories that have a positive ending) are associated with higher relational, social, and psychological well-being (Holman & Horstman, 2019; Koenig Kellas et al., 2020; Koenig Kellas, 2010; Koenig Kellas et al., 2015; Koenig Kellas, 2018; Pangborn, 2019). This research suggests that positive emotional affect within stories may indicate well-being.

The present research investigates the emotional affect present in written stories of sibling death from surviving siblings more than five years past the death. It works to replicate, contradict, or extend the work connecting storytelling and well-being from Koenig Kellas (2018), Holman and Horstman (2019), and others.

Additionally, a person's ability to tell a story is dictated by their contexts and surroundings. The third heuristic of CNSM theory, *translational storytelling,* is about researching what surroundings, contexts, and perspective-taking behaviors provide the space for individuals to actively tell stories that promote sense-making and, therefore, well-being. This heuristic aims to contribute to building programs, interventions, therapies, and other ways to "improve communicated sense-making, connection, understanding, and psychosocial well-being" (Koenig Kellas et al., 2020, p. 363). Translational storytelling aims to create interventions to help individuals through the use of retrospective storytelling to work through a traumatic event by encouraging (re)framing techniques and collaborative narratives that promote well-being. The present research uses retrospective storytelling to explore emotional affect and its potential

connection to well-being to help develop future interventions, which could then be studied and tested using the translational heuristic.

Several researchers have established that cognitions and meaning are actively restructured during emotional expression and disclosure (Frattaroli, 2006; Gilrain, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2005). CNSM research, specifically, has examined the affect within these emotional expressions through "narrative sequences" during disclosure of a person's well-being through measures of relational satisfaction and perceived stress (Holman & Horstman, 2019) and satisfaction with life (Koenig Kellas et al., 2015) using the Satisfaction with Life (SWL) scale (Diener et al. 1985). The SWL scale measures peoples' "overall evaluation of their life" (p. 71), and this scale has been used in narrative writing studies (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006) as well as in connection to CNSM (Koenig Kellas et al., 2015).

Perspective-taking behaviors: The role of the listener

As an interactive process, storytelling happens in the presence of others. Koenig Kellas and associates (2020) argue that the way a listener behaves and responds during a story contributes to the storyteller's ability to make sense of the event. The CNSM concepts of interactional sense-making (ISM) and communicated perspective-taking (CPT) are essential when developing translational interventions. The seventh proposition in Koenig Kellas's (2018) CNSM theory states that "Interventions that incorporate (a) positive narrative (re)framing techniques and/or (b) high levels of ISM will result in benefits for individuals and families in the context of difficulty, trauma, illness, and/or stress" (p. 69). Proposition five argues that "higher levels of CPT predict higher levels of individual and relational well-being" (p. 67). The interactional process of storytelling and storywitnessing is a collaboration, and the behaviors exhibited by the listener influence the way a story is told.

Koenig Kellas et al. (2013) identified six ways “interactional partners acknowledge, attend to, and confirm one another’s perspectives” during storytelling (p. 329). First, *"agreement*" is when the listener understands and agrees with the teller's perspective. Listeners who exhibit this behavior nod their heads, maintain eye contact and use confirming and validating language. The second is *"attentiveness*," which usually connects to "agreement" by adding in other confirming verbals like saying “mmm hmmm,” patience with the storytelling process, and other supportive behaviors. The third is *"relevant contributions*," which involve "adding details or content to the story that filled in the information or added to what the teller wanted to say" (Koenig Kellas et al. 2013, p. 337). Fourth, *"coordination*" is how in sync the storyteller and listener are during the interaction. Coordination involves a sense of joint behavior or functioning together during the storytelling process (i.e., body positive, timing). Fifth is *"positive tone*," which includes expressions of appropriate humor, love, and kindness during the story. Lastly, "*freedom to tell*," which means that the listener gave the storyteller room or space to tell the story openly.

These six behaviors have been measured through observations (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013) and by measuring participants' perceptions of behavior during a particular interaction with a friend (Koenig Kellas et al., 2015) and spouse (Horstman & Holman, 2018). The extant research indicates that the way a listener behaves during a story contributes to the sense-making process. The present study would retrospectively question which of these behaviors are perceived by bereaved storytellers to be salient during their previous telling of the story of their sibling's death. Translational CNSM aims to build interventions that incorporate high levels of ISM and CPT behaviors, and the present study would help to highlight the most important behaviors to include in interventions for bereaved siblings.

A Proposed Study of Distal Sibling Grief

This study works to connect the emotional affect (negative, positive, neutral) in written retrospective sibling death stories with well-being, as measured by overall satisfaction with life. A second goal is to understand which types of perspective-taking behaviors are perceived as salient for the participants in past sibling death storytelling experiences, to develop translational interventions that utilize similar contexts to promote sense-making opportunities and increase well-being in bereaved populations.

The following research questions and hypothesis are based on the above review of literature:

RQ1: *What emotional affect is present in distally bereaved siblings' written stories about their sibling's death after being removed from the event for at least five years?*

RQ2: *Does the presence of emotional affect siblings' distal bereavement stories relate to their satisfaction with life?*

H1: *Participants who write stories that include statements of positive emotional affect will have greater satisfaction with life.*

RQ3: *Which perspective-taking behaviors do participants identify as most salient in telling stories of their sibling's death?*

Research Positionality Statement

This research is born out of the researcher's own sibling grief. Her sister died in August of 2018, which led to her wanting to understand how people process the death of their siblings and communicate about their grief. To avoid self-study, the researcher does not fit the requirement of the participants in this study, as her sister has not been dead for five years as of 2022.

Method

Procedure

Following IRB approval, a survey link accompanied by an approved message were distributed on various social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Reddit). The researcher connected with grief influencers on Instagram, who shared the survey and message with their followers. Initially, the survey was shared only through third parties, but an amendment was filed so the researcher could share the survey directly on their social media accounts. The amendment also expanded the demographics to include participants from the United States and Canada. Survey responses were collected from November 2021 through January 2022.

Participants

Two hundred and seventy-seven participants agreed to take the survey, and 174 survey responses met the requirements for this study. To be included in this research, participants had to respond to the Satisfaction with Life Scale, the scale of the perspective-taking behaviors, the majority of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, and write a response to the prompt "Please write the story of your sibling's death." These 174 participants lost at least one sibling five years ago, ranging from five to 42 years since the sibling's death (M = 13.2 years ago, SD = 9.4). All these participants lived in the United States or Canada. The ages were reported via ranges, 18-29 years (n = 25, 14%), 30-39 (n= 55, 31%), 40-49 (n = 41, 24%), 50-59 (n = 31, 18%), and 60 or above (n = 22, 13%). The sample contained seven males (4%), 166 females (95%), and one non-binary person (1%). Most participants identified as White (n = 153, 87.9%), with eight identifying as Latino/Hispanic (4.6%), three as Asian (1.7%), two as American Indian or Alaska Native (1.2%), six as multiracial (two American Indian or Alaska Native and White (1.1%), two as Black or African American and White (1.1%), and two as Asian and White (1.1%)), one as

Black/African American (.6%) and one as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (.6%). Most participants were married or living with a domestic partner (n = 112, 64%), 49 were single (28%), nine were in a relationship but not cohabitating (5%), and four were casually dating (3%). Seven participants had a household income less than $15,000 per year (4%), 11 made between $15,000 and $24,999 (6%), 11 made between $25,000 and $34,999 (6%), 17 made between $35,000 and $49,999 (10%), 28 between $50,000 and $74,999 (16%), 32 between $75,000 and $99,999 (18%), 34 between $100,000 and $149,999 (20%), 21 between $150,000 and $199,999 (12%), and 13 made over $200,000 (8%). Most participants identified as "not religious" (n = 73, 42%), 48 said they were "slightly religious" (28%), 34 identified as "moderately religious" (20%), and 19 said they were "very religious" (10%). Most of the participants had a bachelor's degree (n = 61, 35%), 43 had a master's degree (25%), 33 had some college but no degree (19%), 16 had a high school diploma (10%), 13 had an associate degree (7%), four had a professional degree (2%), and four had a doctorate (2%).

Measures

Satisfaction with Life

Perceived well-being was measured using the Satisfaction with Life (SWL) scale created by Diener et al. (1985) and used by McAdams et al. (2001), Lyubomirsky et al. (2006), and Koenig Kellas et al. (2015). This Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree,* 7 = *strongly agree)* uses five items to assess a person's current satisfaction with their life. This measure includes items such as "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal" and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Higher scores indicated greater perceived overall satisfaction with one's own life, suggesting higher levels of well-being (M= 3.94, SD = 1.59, α = .92)

Positive and Negative Affect

Participants' current/recent mood beyond their storytelling encounter was measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS), developed by Watson et al. (1998) and utilized by Koenig Kellas et al. (2013) and Horstman and Holman (2018), was used. This scale measures the recent experience of feeling 20 emotions using a Likert-type Scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). The PANAS scale measured both positive and negative emotions and feelings experienced by participants within the past few days. This measurement was used to control for the participants' overall emotional affect during everyday life, separate from their storytelling content. During the analysis phase, the PANAS was split into two measures, PANASNeg, which included the ten scales measuring for negative affect only (M= 3.28, SD = 1.15, α = .98), and PANASPos, which included the ten scales measuring for positive affect only (M = 3.71, SD = 1.11, α = .91).

Perspective-Taking Behaviors

The salience of listener perspective-taking behaviors during the typical telling of the story of a sibling's death was measured using items identified by Koenig Kellas et al. (2013; 2015). Participants rated how much it mattered to them to experience each of the six perspective-taking behaviors from others when telling the story of their sibling's death. Six Likert-type items (rated from 1= *not important at all* to 7= *extremely important)* were used. This measure includes items such as "How much the listener agrees with your story" and "How much freedom you had to tell the story (i.e., you felt you had the appropriate space to talk and tell your story)." Higher scores indicate higher salience of the perspective-taking behaviors in choosing to tell the story of a sibling's death.

Frequency of storytelling

To measure the approximate frequency of telling the story of their sibling's death to others, the researcher used a single-item measurement to ask participants how often they tell the story they have written in the survey to others. This measurement used a Likert-Type scale (1 = *Never tell the story,* 7 = *Tell the story often*). The frequency of storytelling assessed whether the stories being shared with the researchers were stories that the individual was likely to tell in other interactions. Results indicated that these stories of sibling death were told moderately often (M = 4.7, SD = 1.8).

Emotional Affect

Participants were prompted to write the story of their sibling's death. They were free to write a story of any detail or length: there were no other parameters or directions given to participants. Emotional affect in the story was then assessed in statements of emotion referencing either the storyteller or a character in the story. Units containing explicit expressions of guilt, sadness, uncertainty, stress, misfortune, negativity, remorse, or other words suggesting negative feelings were coded as negative affect. For example, "I am filled with guilt and rage and when I think about it I still break down sobbing." Units containing expressions of growth, understanding, joy, love, pride, gratitude, happiness, or other words that indicate positive feelings were coded as positive affect. For example, "I was glad to be that safe haven for him." Units void of emotional affect (i.e., just the facts) were coded as neutral affect. For example, "She died in a car accident Christmas night after hanging out with some friends." Stories were then categorized for emotional affect based on the percentage of negative, neutral, and positive statements in each story.

Inter-coder Reliability

For analysis, the reported stories were first broken into thought units. A thought unit was considered "any statement that contained a subject (explicit or clearly implied) and a predicate/verb (explicit or clearly implied) and/or could stand alone as a complete thought" (Meyers & Brashers, 2010, p. 31). To establish reliability, a second independent coder was trained for both unitizing (Meyers & Brashers, 2010) and coding emotional affect (Holman & Horstman, 2019; McAdams et al., 2001; Pennebaker, 1993; Scrignaro et al., 2018). The researchers used Krippendorff's (1995) recommendations for establishing reliability. The primary researcher and the secondary coder used 36 death stories from a public online sibling bereavement forum to practice unitizing and coding considered as a practice set. These 36 stories were chosen because they resembled the stories from the present study. The two coders unitized the first six stories together to gain coherence in the process, and the remaining 30 stories were unitized independently, with a high degree of reliability at α =.93. The discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Next, both coders unitized 50 random stories from the 174 death stories in the current data set. The degree of agreement between the two coders for this process was again high at α =.90. After the establishment of reliability, the primary researcher unitized the remaining data. The two coders repeated this process for the process of coding each unit for emotional affect. Again, the practice stories from the online forum were used to establish reliability with the affect codes. The coders practiced together on 54 units (one story) to reach an understanding of the process of coding for emotional affect. Then, four stories (138 units) from the practice set were coded independently with a reliable result of α =.85. The final reliability step was coding 152 units (10 stories) from the 50 random stories in the current data set, with a reliability result of α

=.92. Once inter-coder reliability was established, the primary researcher coded the remaining 97 stories for emotional affect. The 174 stories were unitized into 2,501 thought units. Stories ranged from one thought unit to 95 thought units (M = 14.2, SD= 15.7).

Results

All of the statistical analyses for this study were conducted using SPSS. A correlation matrix of all continuous variables was generated to identify significant correlations (see Table 2). The researcher used the matrix to identify any relationship outside of those predicted that might require statistical control or further analysis. Separate ANOVAs were run between each categorical demographic variable of race, relationship status, education level, income, and religiosity with the dependent variable of SWL to identify any group differences that might require statistical control or further analysis. No significant results were found in any of these ANOVA tests.

Research Question One

The first research question asked what emotional affect was present within distally bereaved siblings' stories about their sibling's death. The researcher analyzed the presence and degree of positive and negative emotional affect present based on total thought units in each story. Stories that contained 100% neutral thought units were labeled as *Factual* (n = 74, 42.5%), and this lack of positive or negative affect in the story emerged as the most frequent emotional affect present (essentially, lack of any emotional affect and instead full factual reporting style). Stories containing both neutral and negative affect thought units were labeled *Factual with Negative Affect* (n = 59, 33.9%), and this type of story occurred with the second-highest degree of frequency. Stories containing neutral, positive, and negative affect were labeled *Factual with Mixed Affect* and emerged third in the frequency of story type told (n = 29, 16.7%). Stories

containing only neutral and positive affect were labeled *Factual with Positive Affect* and occurred relatively rarely in the data (n = 11, 6.7%). Finally, a single-story containing a single negative thought unit was labeled *Negative Affect* (n = 1, .6%).

Overall, stories were overwhelming neutral: they ranged from 0 -100% neutral (factual), and the average story was 88% neutral (SD = .17). Secondarily, participants used negative affect within their stories about their sibling's death. Stories ranged from 0 – 100% negative, and stories including negative affect averaged 10% negativity (SD = .14). Death stories also included expressions of positive affect. Stories ranged from 0-33% positive, though positive affect only accounted for an average of 2% of the story (SD = .05) when it was present.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked whether the emotional affect in these distal bereavement stories related to Satisfaction with Life (SWL). A hierarchical regression was run to isolate the specific predictive power of affect in stories separate from storytellers' overall mood to hold the mood state constant from storytelling content. Since negative mood has been shown to be more salient than positive mood for individuals, PANASNeg was held as a constant in the first block of the regression. The variables of interest in this research question (percentage of negative, positive, or neutral affect in the story) were entered into the second block of the regression. Satisfaction with Life was entered as the dependent variable.

The results of the first block of the hierarchical linear regression analysis revealed a model that was statistically significant (F = 66.98, p < .001). An R2 value of .29 associated with this step in the regression model suggests that the PANASNeg accounted for 29% of the variation in SWL. However, the second block of the regression did not show that the affective content of the story predicted any significant amount of SWL separate from the PANASNeg

score ($F = 17.8$, $p > .05$). An R2 value of .31 in the second step of the model suggests that the three variables (negative, positive, or neutral affect) together only accounted for an additional 2% of variation in SWL. To answer RQ2, the emotional affect of the story did not significantly predict SWL independent from mood. Mood in the moment was a greater predictor of satisfaction with life than neutral, positive, or negative affect in the stories.

Hypothesis One

The hypothesis predicted that participants who wrote stories that included expressions of positive affect would also have greater satisfaction with life. There was a slight significant correlation between positive emotional affect in the story and SWL ($r = .17$, $p < .05$), so H1 was supported. However, as previously reported in RQ2, the emotional affect of the story was not predictive of SWL when mood in the moment was controlled.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked which perspective-taking behaviors of listeners were most salient to these participants. To address RQ3, descriptive statistics were used to understand the importance of each of the six items measuring the salience of listener's perspective-taking behaviors on a scale from 1-7 (1 being low importance to the speaker, 7 being high importance to the speaker). The most salient perspective-taking behavior was the freedom to tell the story ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 1.4$), followed closely by listener's attention ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.5$), and listener's positive tone ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.6$). How in sync the listen was to the storyteller was rated as more than moderately important ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.7$). Listener's agreement to story ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.9$) and listener's additions ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.8$) were only moderately important to the speaker. No listener perspective-taking behaviors had an average rating of less than the midpoint of the scale,

indicating that all behaviors held at least moderate importance for the storytellers in telling the story of their sibling's death.

Story Length

Although it was not a predicted variable, while analyzing the data, the researcher became aware of how much variation there was in the length of the stories written by participants. Stories ranged from one thought unit to 95 thought units (M = 14.2, SD= 15.7). The most commonly told stories were short (1-10 thought units), making up 57% of the stories told. The second most-frequently appearing stories were medium stories containing between 11-49 thought units (38.5% of stories told). The least commonly told story type were long stories (50+ thought units, 4.6%). The correlation matrix revealed a slight positive correlation between story length and positive affect within the story (r = .18, p = < *.05*). This finding indicates that longer stories are more likely to include positivity. Interestingly, there was a pattern that did not quite reach significance that associated the frequency of storytelling with the length of the story, such that the more a person tells a story, the shorter the story gets. Since this pattern did not quite reach significance (r = -.15, p = .051), this finding is noted as one that deserves future research attention and is not posited with any definitive conclusions.

Discussion

This study explored how distally bereaved siblings tell the story of the death of their sibling after being removed from the event for five or more years. Participants were prompted to write the story of their sibling's death. Stories were explored for the emotional affect present and connected between the stories and the participants' overall satisfaction with life. This study also examined the salience of perspective-taking behaviors of listeners during the storytelling process

surrounding the death of their sibling. This study adds to the literature on sibling grief, distal grief, CNSM Theory, and the benefits of story-writing and storytelling. It holds the potential to contribute to interventions for bereaved siblings to openly tell the story of their sibling's death in a way that promotes sense-making and healing.

Emotional Affect in the Story

In answering RQ1 it became abundantly clear that these distally bereaved siblings were primarily using neutral/factual language to write their sibling's death story. Forty-two percent of the stories contained only neutral statements, and the average story was 88% neutral. Expressions of emotional affect during the storytelling process have been posited as helpful in the sense-making process after a traumatic experience (Fredrickson, 2001; 2004; Gilrain, 2005; Pennebaker, 1993), so this finding was surprising. While Fredrickson (2001; 2004) argues for the expression of positive emotions, Gilrain's (2005) research illustrated that the expression of both positive and negative emotions could be beneficial to sense-making and acceptance. Proposition two of CNSM (see Table 1) states that positively framed stories will indicate higher well-being and the present research suggests that while positive emotional affect in stories was associated with SWL, it is rare. Most of the distally bereaved siblings in this study abstained from emotional affect while telling the story of their sibling's death at least five years after the event.

This finding that most of the story data were comprised of neutral thought units may indicate that these bereaved siblings were able to make sense of the death overtime. Emotional affect (especially negative) may imply that the storyteller is still processing and experiencing disorientation from the event. Basinger and colleagues (2016) study found that the further removed a person was from the death, the easier it was to talk about it. Within the realm of CNSM, this connects to retrospective storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2018) because the neutral

affect may illustrate that meaning has been made through the years. The lack of emotional affect may signify that these participants are no longer highly emotionally invested in the story of their sibling's death. Time does not remove grief, but it may soften it, and these bereaved siblings may still feel the loss of their sibling, but their neutral approach to the story may also indicate acceptance.

Holman and Horstman (2019) argue that stories void of emotional expression may reflect storytellers who are not invested or ambivalent about the experience. Yet, the neutral thought units and stories in this research may instead indicate an understanding that the past cannot be changed, and that participants have learned over five or more years to be factual about the event because getting emotional does not change the outcome. While CNSM argues that the expression of positive emotions indicates that time and energy has been spent in the cognitive processing of an event to work towards meaning and sense-making (Holman & Horstman, 2019; Koenig Kellas, 2018), this may be a finding that does not hold true after stories have been told for many years. While most of the storytelling content in this study was neutral, over half (57.5%) of the stories contained at least one thought unit of emotional affect, so it is evident that emotional expressions may be a minor part of the telling the story of a sibling's death even in distal bereavement.

Non-affective Related Aspects of the Story

The analyses revealed additional correlations beyond storytelling content that may contribute to the participants' satisfaction with life. These aspects of the data are not related to the emotional affect (or lack thereof) within the story but instead connect characteristics of the participants, their grieving time, and how often they indicated they had told the story to others outside of the survey.

Age and time since death

Age significantly correlated with how much neutrality and positive affect the stories had compared to stories with negative affect. Age was also associated with higher SWL overall. The older a participant was, the better their overall lives were, which may have been associated with reducing or eliminating negative affect from the story. The reduction of negative affect in older participants may also be because for most of these participants, the older they were, the further removed they were from the event of the death. Time since the death was also positively correlated with SWL ($r = .19$, $p < .05$), suggesting that while grief may not end (Gilrain, 2005), it might change over time, and the negative emotional intensity may dampen (Basinger et al., 2016). Participants who had lived a long life and had more time to process the death of their sibling used fewer negative affect thought units in their stories, had higher positive moods in the moment (measured by PANASPos) and reported greater satisfaction with life overall. This data suggests that a longer life may mean time removed from a traumatic event which might help with accepting the event and making sense of the experience.

Frequency of telling the story

There was a significant correlation ($r = .18$, $p < .05$) between the frequency of times the participants reported they told the story and SWL. This finding adds to CNSM because it potentially illustrates how the ability to tell and retell a story contributes to how a person moves through their grief over time. Repeating a story does not change the outcome. Still, it can change how a person thinks about the event and experience, and that cognitive processing may lead to higher satisfaction with life and well-being (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Gilrain, 2005). Participants who were able to tell the stories of their sibling's death multiple times in the past five or more years seemed to have benefitted from that process.

Translational Implications

Communicated Narrative Sense-Making theory argues for creating interventions to promote storytelling as a critical translational outcome (Holman & Horstman, 2019; Koenig Kellas, 2018). The present study results can inform storytelling-based grief interventions in several ways. The current research stresses the importance of story listeners and creating a space for the distally bereaved to feel free in the way they tell their stories, regardless of emotional affect.

Openness to any degree of emotional affect in storytelling

The present research found that positive emotional affect in distally bereaved siblings' stories was associated with mood in the moment and SWL, suggesting that even small amounts of emotional expression may be a valuable part of the distal grief storytelling process. While positive affect was the only emotional affect correlated with higher satisfaction with life levels, it is not the only type of emotional expression that exists. Talking about and expressing the negative emotions which accompany grief can potentially help alleviate and reduce those negative emotions (Thai & Moore, 2018) and create space for more positive affect in the future. Story listeners need to be prepared for expressions of positive *or* negative emotions (as well as their absence) in stories of sibling death five years or more into bereavement. Providing the space to allow storytellers to process their affective experiences openly may encourage them to reframe and explore emotions within their grief (Brock, 2022).

Increasing the frequency of storytelling

The present research also suggests that there is a relationship between telling the story multiple times over time and satisfaction with life. Frequency was not associated with positive, negative, or neutral affect, and yet a pattern began to emerge suggesting that simply telling the

story, regardless of emotional expression, was associated with satisfaction. Over time outsiders may stop asking about the story of a sibling's death, but the current research suggests that ongoing opportunities for storytelling may continue to be helpful to distally bereaved siblings. Most of these participants had been grieving for over ten years, and while SWL increased as time passed, it did not necessarily mean their grief had ended (Gilrain, 2005). Grief is an expression of love, and by prompting and promoting ongoing storytelling from the distally bereaved, that unending love for the dead sibling is encouraged and honored.

Proposition six of CNSM (see Table 1) argues that promoting narrative reflection within stories is beneficial. The present research adds to this by arguing that promoting the narrative multiple times may contribute to well-being over time. This finding also potentially weakens the argument of CNSM's second proposition because participants in this study seemed to have benefited more from the frequency of times they told the story over time than the inclusion of positive affect. The act of telling the story multiple times over time to supportive others may associate to more SWL than the emotional affect within the story alone for the distally bereaved. This finding also potentially adds to the seventh proposition of CNSM, proposing that interventions that incorporate frequency of telling the story will be associated with benefits for individuals.

Providing the space for the freedom to tell the story

Participants in this study reported "freedom to tell the story" as the most essential aspect of listeners' behavior when telling the story of their sibling's death, suggesting that simply creating a space for the bereaved to tell their story openly is the most critical thing a listener can do. Studies have found that friends or family members of the bereaved often do not know what to say (Basinger et al., 2016; Gilrain, 2005), but this research suggests that listeners do not have to

say anything at all except to ask to hear the story. Prompting the story and being available to listen and witness the story without judgment may be a way for those desiring to support bereaved siblings to help these individuals to share their stories openly and honestly, which in turn will promote cognitive reprocessing and sense-making (Gilrain, 2005; Koenig Kellas, 2013; 2015).

The process of respectfully promoting a story from a distally bereaved sibling is no easy task. Asking to hear the story of a sibling's death may be uncomfortable and violate social norms and privacy rules (Basinger et al., 2016). Those wishing to support distally bereaved siblings by promoting storytelling may find it hard to do so due to the complicated and contextual nature of grief. Supportive others need to be able to effectively prompt the story in a way that promotes narrative reflection without seeming intrusive or rude. More research should explore ways that listeners can prompt death stories in a way that is appropriate and respectful.

Cohen and Samp (2018) argued that topic avoidance around grief (specifically early grief) could perpetuate stress and negative feelings. The present research argues that a listener can help to counteract those detrimental effects in distal grief by creating a space for disclosure to occur. While this measure did not significantly connect to SWL, it did correlate with age and education, suggesting that the older and more educated a participant was, the more they valued a listener giving them the space to tell their story. Simply feeling like the story could be told openly and honestly was essential to these participants.

It is important to note that these participants found all six of the perspective-taking behaviors to be at least moderately salient, emphasizing the importance of social support during the bereavement process. This finding is consistent with other research (Basinger et al., 2016; Cohen & Samp, 2018; Gilrain, 2005), which found that if a person feels supported and respected,

they are more likely to disclose about a traumatic experience or event. Supporting distally bereaved siblings long after the death may benefit well-being and sense-making in the ongoing bereavement process.

Limitations

Many limitations exist within this research. First, despite robust attempts at diverse participant recruitment, there is a demographic limitation. Most of the participants for this study were white, middle-class women, so this research represents an exploration of one demographic group that may inform research into others, but it is not generalizable. Future research should attempt to reach a more diverse population of distally bereaved siblings- potentially expanding the recruitment to include other countries and languages. Another suggestion for future recruitment would be to expand beyond social media and approach organizations and non-profits that provide services directly to bereaved populations.

Secondly, this research did not explore the content of the stories. In the unitizing and coding for emotional affect, the primary researcher noticed recurring themes within the stories that could be explored to elaborate further on these findings: such as any relationship between the cause of death (e.g., suicide, illness, accident, expected, unexpected, etc.) and emotional affect present in the stories or SWL. Most of the stories included the exact cause of death, though this was not included in the analysis. No experience is the same, and even though all of these participants were distally bereaved siblings, their experiences and traumas varied. The unexpected nature of some deaths may contribute to the journey of making sense of the death (Pangborn, 2019). Exploring these variations further through qualitative analysis and quantitative measures may be valuable.

Another limitation connects to the unknown quality of these sibling relationships. Not all siblings are close, and some participants may not have had a strong emotional reaction to their sibling's death. Future research should also attempt to understand how the nature of the sibling relationship in life connects to bereavement, well-being, sense-making, and the presence of emotional affect in the story after a sibling's death.

Additionally, there is potentially a limitation to the survey itself and how the story was prompted. Participants were not explicitly asked for emotional expression. While this promoted a more authentic and natural story, future research could explore whether results differ if participants felt encouraged to use emotional expressions of affect within their stories. In line with this limitation to the survey, the survey format may also have impacted the way participants wrote their stories. At the beginning of their stories, a few participants noted that they would not be able to do the story justice based on the format (on a cell phone) or because of their context (mothering multiple children while trying to respond to the survey). It is possible that the context and format of the survey contributed to the neutrality of the stories.

These limitations should not take away from the findings surrounding the creation of interventions to provide space and freedom to tell for bereaved siblings and potentially other bereaved demographics. Creating or finding spaces for the distally bereaved to continue to tell and retell their stories may contribute to the ability to make sense out of deaths that do not make sense. Online spaces (Brock, 2022) and group interventions (Pangborn, 2019) have been found to be particularly beneficial and should be explored further.

The Context of COVID-19 and this Study

While COVID-19 was not studied or included in the research, it is noteworthy that the timeframe of this research occurred during a pandemic which may have amplified participants'

grief experiences. This research occurred between late 2021 and early 2022 when many people were feeling pandemic fatigue and acute grief from compound losses due to the context of the pandemic. Collecting data during this time may have impacted responses as participants reflected on past grief while balancing potential current grief.

Suggestions for future research

Distally bereaved humans, in general, should continue to be studied. Grief is not linear. It often does not "go away," but does seem to become less intense and emotionally charged as time passes. It should be honored and acknowledged regardless of how long ago the loved one died. Death and grief are an integral part of what it means to be human. More studies should explore how grieving humans continue to experience and communicate their losses after significant time has passed since the death. Studies should also explore distally bereaved siblings' stories when specifically prompted for emotional expression. While overall mood, SWL, and stories tended to become more positive with age and time since the death, many of these participants' stories contained content that indicated they were still experiencing grief. As time passes, grief changes but is still felt and experienced by those who remain. Continuing to study the way long-term grief is processed is crucial to creating interventions to promote grief storytelling to foster meaning-making and sense-making. The findings that the frequency of storytelling benefited these distally bereaved siblings over time should be examined in acute bereavement.

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Appendix

Table 1

Heuristic	Proposition
Retrospective Storytelling	1. "*The content of retrospective storytelling reveals individual, relational, and intergenerational meaning-making, values, and beliefs"* (p. 65)
	2."*Retrospective storytelling content that is framed positively (e.g., redemptively, prosocially, affectively positive, characterized by high levels of agency, coherently) will be positively related to individual and relational health and well-being." (p. 66)*
Interactional Storytelling	3. *Higher levels of ISM (Interactional sense-making) predict higher levels of narrative sense-making" (p. 67)*
	4. *"Higher levels of ISM predict higher levels of individual and relational health and well-being" (p. 67)*
	5. *Higher levels of Communicating Perspective Taking predict higher levels of individual and relational health and well-being" p. 67)*
Translational Storytelling	6. *"Interventions that promote narrative reflection and sense-making benefit participants in the context of difficulty, trauma, illness, and/or stress" (p. 69)*
	7. *Interventions that incorporate (a) positive narrative (re)framing techniques and/or (b) high levels of ISM will result in benefits for individuals and families in the context of difficulty, trauma, illness, and/or stress" (p. 69)*

CNSM Heuristics and Propositions

Note. Collected from Koenig Kellas, 2018.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7,	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	17.	18.	19.
1. Age																			
2. Gender	-.14																		
3. Religious	.14	.06																	
4. Education	-.07	.01	-.12																
5. Income	.22**	-.08	-.01	.15*															
6. YrAgoDeath	.37**	-.05	.03	.02	.04														
7. FreqStorTell	.12	.10	.06	-.04	.09	.05													
8. ListenerAgree	.06	.07	-.01	-.03	.01	-.04	.11												
9. ListenerAttent	-.16*	-.01	-.06	.12	-.02	-.08	.04	.30**											
10. ListenerAdds	.19*	-.00	.12	-.05	.01	.03	.08	.33**	.31**										
11. ListenerInSync	-.01	.03	.06	.12	.03	.04	.19*	.34**	.52**	.44**									
12. ListenPosTone	-.11	.03	.08	.16*	.06	-.10	.13	.34**	.68**	.31**	.64**								
13. FreedomToTell	-.26**	-.02	-.01	.20**	-.01	-.13	.10	.14	.68**	.24**	.49**	.64**							
14. %Neutral	-.17*	.03	-.03	.08	.02	.13	.08	-.06	.02	-.08	-.01	.06	.02						
15. %Negative	.07	-.07	-.03	-.14	-.04	-.12	-.07	.04	-.03	.08	.01	-.06	-.00	-.87**					
16. %Positive	.20**	.08	.01	.01	-.02	.01	.01	.01	-.00	.02	-.05	-.00	-.01	-.36**	.08				
17. StoryLength	-.12	.08	-.11	-.01	.03	-.01	-.15	-.08	-.00	.04	-.00	-.03	.07	-.10	.08	.18*			
18. PANASPos	.12	-.07	.01	.28**	-.02	.22*	.10	.09	.09	.06	.12	.09	.08	.02	-.14	.11	-.02		
19. PANASNeg	-.31**	-.03	-.12	-.15	-.05	-.29**	-.02	-.03	.04	.06	.06	.13	.22**	-.04	.18*	-.19*	-.01	-.46**	
20. SWL	.19*	-.03	.14	.14	.13	.19*	.18*	-.03	.01	.06	.07	-.01	-.03	.02	-.15	.17*	.04	.59**	-.54**

***. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2- tailed).*

**. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2 -tailed).*