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EXPIRING, ETERNAL OR SIMPLY MONSTROUS? IDENTITY OF BEREAVED MOTHERS: A PRELIMINARY INSIGHT

Abstract. The paper aims to investigate transitions of maternal identity after child loss and provide insight into how maternal identity reshapes itself. Prior to this, the notion of identity is examined, including maternal identity. Historical and statistical background of parental loss caused by child death is provided. The paper attempts to go beyond the existing body of knowledge and descriptions of maternal bereavement identity and proposes a different lens which appears purposeful for further intended research – namely, the monstrous identity of a bereaved mother. Methodologically, the paper applies an integrative review, aspiring to overview the scientific body of research in maternal loss, review it, and finally elaborate on it.

Keywords: bereaved mothers; identity transition/shift; monstrous identity; child loss.

INTRODUCTION

The bereavement after child loss is the most traumatic experience an individual may experience. Family trajectories usually alter significantly after such a tragic event and the family's equilibrium becomes severely disrupted. "The death of a central family figure [who children usually are for parents] can produce emotional shock waves that reverberate throughout the entire extended family, perhaps even creating changes in individual family members who may have had limited or no direct contact with the deceased member" (Bowen, 1976, quoted in Anderson and Sabatelli, 2011, p. 270). However, for parents a child's death is a particularly heavy loss (Shear, 2012). It is premature (*mors immatura*) and opposed to the normal life cycle, because parents expect their children to mourn them, not *vice versa*.

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Children should outlive parents, otherwise the natural order or the universe's justice are disrupted (Crowe, 2006). Oftentimes, bereaved parents' inner and outer landscapes mutate mischievously, their hopes and dreams, their future are all shattered. Their previous assumptions about the world and their own lives are transformed. This causes "an abrupt, terrifying disillusionment" (Beder, 2004, p. 258), when a tragedy of this magnitude and irrevocability is experienced (Buckle and Fleming, 2011). Life changes because the loved one "stubbornly stays disappeared",¹ as the great Polish poet Wisława Szymborska would say. Loved ones tend to frame life's purpose, sense of belonging and our identity, to some extent, their loss extorts a new identity, an identity of a bereaved parent (Champion and Kilcullen, 2023). Almost thirty years ago, Simon S. Rubin (1993) in his paper called "The Death of a Child is Forever: The Life Course Impact of Child Loss" suggested that bereaved parents continue to experience the bond as very strong. Therefore, it seems like quite a time to shape this new identity. Obviously, individuals are very different as parents, and the same applies to bereavement-induced transitions in one's identity after losing a child.

In this literature review paper, I intend to investigate bereaved maternal identity and make an attempt to shed some light on the question of its expiry and continuity or, perhaps transformation and/or regeneration. The paper does not argue parental bereavement possible differences due to gender, nor does it belittle fathers', siblings', or grandparents' grief and post-loss traumas of any loved ones. Instead, it focuses on mothers' identity changes caused by child loss. As a preliminary research, this study does not recognize or highlight the cause of children's death; rather, its goal is to capture how mothers tackle their maternal identity changes in order to better understand them and find possible new outlooks on examining how they manifest via further own, that is, qualitative research in the future. What is more, in order to offer any institutional or non-institutional support for bereaved mothers (and fathers too, obviously), it is essential to acknowledge their (new?) identities.

To accomplish my goal, I present existing scientific inquiry into some chosen, sociological perspectives on identity as a term itself. Then, I look into the mother's identity with all its gains and strains understood as both social expectations and maternal role performance, attending fears connected with it, too. Having such an insight, I go on to discuss child loss from the global past perspective, quote specific numbers and further explore transformative maternal identity connecting it with bereavement. There, I look at notions such as maternal

¹ A verse from Wisława Szymborska's poem "Cat in an Empty Apartment", trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (2010).

bereavement effect and global burden of bereaved mothers. Finally, I make an attempt to acknowledge this tough, new identity through its possible descriptions being expiring or eternal, as initially I aimed. Such a dichotomous approach, as phrased in an earlier version of the paper's title, was supposed to play a provocative role here. Yet, I soon realized, owing to the catastrophic nature of a new identity emerging, more often than not, it is almost impossible to portray it with words, expressions, adjectives other than "monstrous" and decided to include it in the final title of the presented paper. When depicting the bereaved mother's identity with the adjective, I understood that perhaps it is an image that does far better than words, when we try to comprehend it. Therefore, a piece of art is used in the latter parts of the paper as an illustration and discussion background of this identity, hard to frame and as an inspiration for further research.

The paper also recalls some examples of poetry or epistolary confiding – all to portray how art in general, via its similes, metaphors or figurative linguistic expressions, strives to reflect and/or shape social life (Inglis, 1938; Coser, 1972; Alexander, 2003), including the social aspects of bereavement. The theoretical framework to address a notion of identity is built by symbolic interactionism (which is pivotal here). Yet, as the framework rather fails to fully secure a communicational dimension of maternal bereaved identity, I decided to invoke some literary and artistic exemplifications in a few passages to approach the subtle yet still little palpable meaning/emanation of bereaved maternal identity (Griswold, 1987).

Finally, as a sociologist I have stumbled upon certain problems with analysing bereaved maternal identity from my own scholarly perspective. Since Emile Durkheim's famous book on suicide published in the late nineteenth century, sociologists have made efforts to investigate not just death itself or dying as a process but bereavement too. Yet, the vast majority of both research and theory derives from the professional outlook of practitioners/clinicians facing dying and bereavement in their everyday life. The nature of available research is therefore – to a great extent – psychological. Whilst conducting a literature survey, I unearthed numerous articles, book chapters and monographies. However, they have mainly psychological and/or medical/health bias (Faunce and Fulton, 1958; Yakkaldevi, 2014).

Nonetheless, some researchers (Thompson et al., 2016) suggest complementing psychology for highlighting myriads of aspects connected with death, dying and bereavement; however, they also underline that social context has overshadowed death in modern societies. Death itself and death-related processes have been relegated from the public sphere to the private space restricted and limited to

families and individuals (Gorer, 1965; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1992). Unfortunately, I believe death-denying societies (Howarth, 2007) force acknowledgment of death on individuals and families, nonetheless. And even so, “within these individualized bereavement paradigms, the socially patterned diversity of ‘bereavement’ experiences has received very little attention (Mayland, 2021), further limiting the lenses through which the aftermath of death is understood” (Mccarthy, Woodthorpe, and Almack, 2023).

Accordingly, little is known about this persistent, sustaining, unrelieved grief that marks bereaved maternal identity in hostage, curving it towards a monstrous identity. The presented text aims to shed more light on the matter.

One final note is needed on the monstrous identity of bereaved mothers. As I was working on this paper, I had an opportunity to observe some support and self-support groups for people experiencing loss of beloved ones, among whom bereaved mothers were present. Their opinion-sharing and the lobby discussions I attended were treated by me as a preliminary and pilot study for my further empirical and qualitative study. Many depictions of bereaved maternal identity experiences and performances have led me to pursue this issue further. The stories I heard (treated with full anonymity here) have been a great incentive for the presented analysis and further research to come.

1. IDENTITY: SOME SELECTED SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The term “identity” seems valid for both sociological and psychodynamic fields. The former is of the greatest interest to me here, but I also allude to the latter when the exposition of the problem so necessitates. It is not easy to formulate an accurate, comprehensive and exhaustive definition of the discussed term for a few reasons. First of all, it has been used quite broadly when relating to a person’s self, their feelings as well as beliefs regarding themselves in reference to i.e. gender or class identities. Secondly, the concept has been connected with playing social roles or using them in order to create certain identity/identities (Marshall, 1996). The possible plural form of the term derives from Erving Goffman’s (1956/2022) question with respect to the existence of an authentic identity underlying the entire array of masks we present to others or – as one might phrase it – managing own identities or maintaining them consciously and purposefully.

Prior to Goffman’s contribution to understanding identity there are Charles H. Cooley’s (1902) and George H. Mead’s (1934) contributions. Cooley believed it is other people’s opinions that shape the way humans perceive themselves.

However, according to Anthony Giddens and Phillip W. Sutton (2017), Mead's input, though drawing on Cooley's works, turned out to be a more structured view on the matter of identity. Similarly to Cooley, Mead considered the *self* as an important human power or skill, resulting in the ability to reflect on our human and social nature. Graham Marshall (1996, p. 232) annotates Mead's opinions in connection with those of W. James, a pragmatist, who with co-fellow thinkers such as Charles S. Peirse or John Dewey desired to progress from structural functionalism towards – then recognized as alternative – symbolic interactionism, as conceived (the name of the approach) by Herbert Blumer in the late 1930s. James and Mead fathomed the *self* as a two-phased course:

- the *I* representing a thorough account of ourselves fabricated out of other people's definition of us, having a subjective, yet creative but unknowable character, and
- the *Me* representing the way we define ourselves in particular social settings, having a more known, determined and social character.

Therefore the selves seem to interact with each other, the *I* and the *Me*, by cause of social reality or action, they emerge from social processes. David Jary and Julia Jary (1991, p. 645) put it as follows: "Emphasis is placed on the 'active', 'interpretative' and 'constructive' capacities or competence, possessed by human actors, as against the determining influence of social structures suggested by theoretical approaches such as functionalism." The extensive meaning of the quotation for the paper's central theme should become apparent in what follows.

To some extent, human identities are carriers of messages about ourselves, certain markers of e.g. appearance (tall, blonde, skinny), group belonging ("she's a mother", "he's a husband", "they are scientists"), collective experiences ("I suffer from cancer"), etc. These markers are consistently connected with networks of specific relationships and we use them in order to construct awareness and perception of self, along with acting, feeling or thinking in particular circumstances. Judith Bessant and Rob Watts (2002, p. 132-138) pinpoint some significant features of the identity concept, which is:

- historical,
- double-sided,
- fragmented/divided,
- fluid and changeable.

Being historical refers to changes which happened to human identities over time. Compare, for instance, being a woman in early nineteenth-century Poland, under the Napoleonic Code that found them minor perpetually and incapable of taking any legal measures besides the last will, and being a woman in Poland

in 2024. **Double-sidedness** appears to be a kind of possible dichotomy of what a good mum “should” act like in terms of social expectations versus how a mother feels she should act. It also means we might not be aware how we are perceived and be surprised once it turns out that our “outer” identity conflicts with the way we regard ourselves. **Fragmentations or divisions** mean possible contradictions within our identities and having to experience frequently continuous tensions when faced with some aspects of them. This can be well illustrated by the situation of being divorced and attempting to remain a practising member of the Catholic community. **Fluidity**, on the other hand, emerges when people are exposed to certain shifts, for example when one marker supplants another – for instance being a “happily married” wife may change over time if she is faced with her partner/husband’s abusive behaviours – she will then turn into an “unhappily married” wife.

All four features of the identity concept resonate in various degrees in the following parts of my paper. The historical aspect is mostly visible in child loss analysed globally. Double-sidedness echoes when maternal identity is described through its gains and strains. Fragmentation reverberates while investigating mother becoming processes. Ultimately, fluidity unfolds and materialises in the entire discussion on my attempts to render maternal bereaved identity.

2. MOTHER’S IDENTITY: GAINS AND STRAINS

Regardless of changing social expectations towards women having children and the ongoing discussion on pressures and/or female biological determinism (Russo, 1976; Oakley, 1980), motherhood remains as central when defining them by other and their own female’s perceptions – even in the act of contradiction, when a woman decides to stay childless (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Dubrawska, 2017). What is more, motherhood is tackled not solely in academic discussions but also in public discourse, including traditional paper press (Sikorska, 2009) and the Internet (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009), and on many occasions, recognized as obvious, evident or natural (Mc Quillan et al., 2008). On others it is regarded as taboo and controversial (Józefowicz, 2017).

Back in the 1990s, motherhood was often described as a supreme achievement in a woman’s life of a physical and emotional character (Weaver and Ussher, 1997). However, Elisabeth Badinter (1998) believes that motherhood is not an exclusive, single determinant of the woman’s affirmation because her fulfilment is now connected with a whole gamut of social roles, mothering and working ones included.

Timings of the decision to have a baby and raise a child have fortunately changed for many women. Though words of the Pulitzer Prize winner and a mother of two, Sylvia Plath – who said in a letter to her mom that she intended to have seven children, publish at least one book and travel widely (Patterson, 1986) – may echo to some degree fears of being punished with motherhood (Correll, Benard, and Paik, 2007; Williams, 2010; Deming, 2022). Yet, motherhood is romanticised (Hryciuk and Korolczuk, 2012), so women learn only when they enter the maternal timeline that the experience itself, the role are burdensome, and it is difficult to be a good mom (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009; Cousins, 2021) and connected with extreme mental load of having to remember “everything” (Harrington and Reese-Melancon, 2022).

Indifferent to strains or even a deeply concealed dimension (Maushart, 1999) of unwanted experience of mothering, as Diana Karklin (2022) depicts it in her radical yet very necessary book, motherhood itself seems a crucial juncture in a life course, as the title of Bogusława Budrowska’s (2002) broadly discussed book, *Macierzyństwo jako punkt zwrotny w życiu kobiety (Motherhood as a Turning Point in Woman’s Life)*, reflects. Giving birth to a child results in changes in female identity. Childbearing is followed by the birth of a new identity (Stern, Bruscheweiler-Stern, and Freeland, 1998). The mother’s *self* transforms gradually, so creating a bond with a newborn means no longer being a single, individual human being; her identity adapts to being responsible for another human being. To develop this new identity in a healthy way, she needs to accept the fact of being a mother (Sosnowska, 2019), otherwise feeling of *self*-loss may lead to emotional turmoil and depression (Lazarus and Rossouw, 2015) or ambivalent emotions about both herself and the baby (Parker, 2005; Mądry, 2012; Takseva, 2017; Smyth, 2020). Miller (2007) suggests that the new identity may be established only through physical mothering: feeding, bathing, singing, etc. to a child.

Yet, one more aspect is vital, especially for our purposes here, namely recognizing the primary phase, the transitory one, without enough scientific attention given to the volatile essence of the newfound identity, which is its intrinsic reframing. When commonly anticipated, it occurs either when motherhood performance alternates along its pathway or/and when child enters adulthood (Reveley, 2019). Unfortunately, it may too, materialize itself in a rather perverted manner.

3. CHILD LOSS: GLOBAL PAST, NUMBERS AND TRANSFORMATIVE MATERNAL IDENTITY

Identity markers depend upon the presence of a person similar or different to ourselves, both of which support humans in their own assignment to identifying who we are. “For instance, a person cannot be a ‘mother’ without having a ‘child’. This typically involves an actual relationship between a mother and her child (a relation of difference), while it presupposes a relationship of difference at the linguistic level (i.e. ‘mothers’ have ‘children’) and a set of actual relations of similarity to other mothers” (Bessant and Watts, 2002, p. 134). This quotation accentuates the verb “have”, reflecting a continuing situation, in a sense. Anna Józefowicz (2017, p. 97), in an introduction to her paper, states that a mother is a woman who “had” a baby, or more specifically, gave birth to one. Such an approach to the subject broadens it to some degree, which is very significant for matters discussed here. By causing the devastating pain of losing a child due to her/his death, **maternal identity becomes assailed**, as Thomas A. Rando (1991) correctly grasped this catastrophic event.

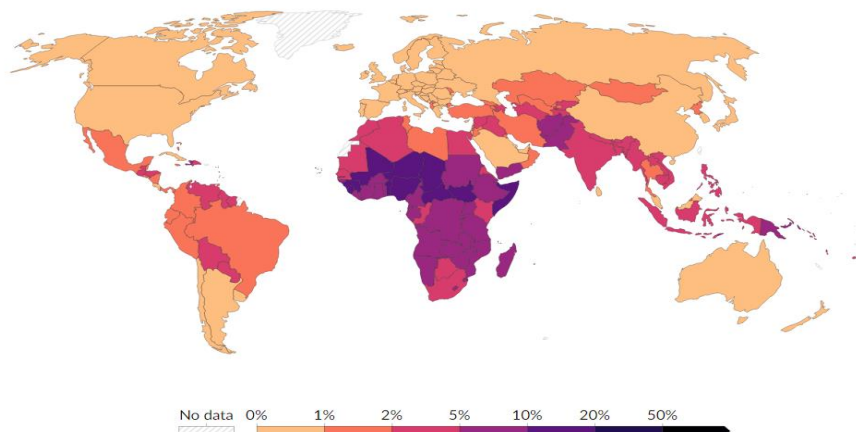
Identities are **transformative**, as we said earlier. Under new circumstances and in changed conditions a person changes her identity, begins to contemplate herself in a manner different to the one previously expressed. In Anselm L. Strauss’ (1959, p. 95) attempts to capture what he terms as turning points, he lists certain conditions underlying a forced mindset alteration. They do not, however, include a case of child loss (Ślęzak, 2012, p. 305-307). This is, in so many respects, comprehensible, considering the fact that nowadays the loss of a child is on the very end of our contemplational reactions when the subject of death takes place, unless concerning a story of irrelevant others or maybe an encounter with a literary/musical/film piece or art.

A lot of Poles have quite an early experience of being “exposed” to child death through literary encounters with Jan Kochanowski’s *Laments* (1580), an obligatory reading for primary school students in Poland. The *Laments* are an ardent expression of despair, pain and loss of the poet’s beloved daughter Ursula. Back in the sixteenth century, the piece was perceived scandalous, because for the first time in poetry the object of mourning was a child – and a girl on top of that – not a noble, old statesman as it used to be in previous works of the kind. Moreover, the sixteenth century was infamous for its high mortality rates among children. However, it was not a specifically Polish phenomenon. Globally speaking, between 10.000 BC and the 1700s, human population grew by merely 0.04% per year and almost every second child died before reaching the age of fifteen,

regardless of geographical location or the culture they were born into. It means all societies failed to make progress in this field, such as ancient Romans, Imperial China, Europe or pre-Columbian Americas (Volk and Atkinson, 2013; Roser, 2023). Roughly estimating, throughout history, child mortality left billions of parents seeing more than one child die in their lifetime. As a matter of fact, it is underlined (Volk and Atkinson, 2013) that child mortality rates should be analysed more thoroughly, since not all deaths of children have ever been registered, and there are not enough infant/children burial remains, as majority of them had not been examined.

Dozens of generations have failed to fight global death rates for children, yet the breakthrough so desired happened at last. Back in the 1950s, global youth mortality reached 27%, decreasing rapidly to 4.3% in 2020. Some countries caught up to 0.3%; others, less fortunate, continue at high rates, like Somalia with 14% (see Map 1 for more detailed data).

Figure1. Estimated share of newborns who die before age of 15



Source: Roser, 2023.

Let us go back to Kochanowski. In the last, nineteenth lament, the author returns to some kind of inner and emotional stability, seems ready to regain his previous, stoical life's outlook, comes to terms with his grief and continues to face what life brings with dignity. It took Kochanowski several years to accomplish such a task. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries research and literature on parents grieving child loss has been depicted as “the most severe, enduring and debilitating form of bereavement within the context of human relationships” (Crow, 2006). Having the impression that the experience seems universal is highly possible, because when

investigated globally, it proves so. Still, gross inequalities continue to exist globally in the burden of child loss, namely between low-income and middle-income countries. Regardless of important pursuits to capture the matter from global, quantitative perspectives, there tends to be a niche with respect to inquiring into costs carried by grieving mothers, despite both child's age at death and mothers' own age when the event happens. Health, physical and mental, safety, social standing, among many others, are at high risk, therefore Emily S. Greenaway et al. (2021) identify it as **global burden of bereaved mothers**.

Findings presented by Catherine H. Rogers et al. (2008) prove consequences of child loss to be more long-lasting than shown by previous research. For instance, more intense depression causes poorer overall well-being, decreased sense of purpose in life (besides anxiety), increased alcohol consumption, assorted somatic issues (Rando, 1993), blaming, guilt, anger or marital/partnership distancing or dissolution, withdrawing into isolation of excessive work (Anderson and Sabatelli, 2011), increased risk of hospitalisation, due to i.e. diabetes or cancer incidence. Above all, some research even indicates an **increase in mothers' mortality**, reaching 133% (based on hazard ratio [HR] estimate). The latter may occur owing to the **maternal bereavement effect** (Gilmer et al., 2012, p. 573; Espinoza and Evans, 2013, p. 372). Alarmingly, there is a possibility that bereaved mothers' internal experiences may stay hidden enough to remain unrecognised by others, based on observing a supposedly "successful" return to other social roles. All of the consequences may linger for more than decades in many cases, leading to a lasting grief.

4. BEREAVED MOTHER'S IDENTITY: EXPIRING, ETERNAL OR SIMPLY MONSTROUS?

The bereaved mother's overall condition, but also her identity, depend on some factors. Let us examine a few. A great impact here is undoubtedly connected with the **nature of the death**: it's likelihood and, additionally, the reasons for it. Should the death of a child be anticipatory, due to, for example, a life threatening disease, the emotional upheaval comes prior to the death itself and is often referred to as **anticipatory grief** (Zilberfein, 1999; Snaman et al., 2021; Najafi et al., 2022). A mother may grieve well before the event of death actually happens, experiencing a sequence of smaller losses connected with the direct one, including additional stresses connected with child's illness forcing transitions of different social roles.

In contrast, **unanticipated**, sudden death of child as a result of sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI), accident, homicide or suicide, will cause even a more intense emotional shockwave. Losing a child for the latter reason brings intense pain, guilt and anger (Young et al., 2012). It is a type of death involving stigma, often contributing to inability to communicate with others or seeking any kind of support (Anderson and Sabatelli, 2011). Bereaved mothers of child's death caused by suicide are at yet higher risk of major depression, PTSD or suicidal thoughts. Their grief is considered **complicated** (Rando, 1993; Shear, 2012; Champion and Kilcullen, 2023). The mode of death does impact parental grief symptomatology.

Another factor underlying bereaving mother's identity engages the **position of a child in the family**. The more central the child, the more intense the transformation. Coming to terms with the death of an only child leaves the bereaved mother with no other children to focus on or even – which is obviously wrong but it does happen – “recruit” them as a replacement (Anderson and Sabatelli, 2011). Yet, from a maternal perspective, having more than one child plays a **protective character** in their bereavement journey (Champion and Kilcullen, 2023).

Then, what kind of identity does a bereaved mother possess? Well, such an identity is unquestionably an issue. “Many of us, much of the time, are able to take identity for granted. We seem to know who we are, we have a good enough working sense of who the others in our lives are, and they appear to relate to us in the same way. Sooner or later, however, a time arrives when identity becomes an issue...” – we read in Richard Jenkins' (1996/2014) *Social Identity*. Stripped of a role of child's caregiver, leaves her with an **identity internalised during the presence of the object** – a child (Toller, 2008). Hence, what is left is either trying to rebuild the identity in the forced absence of a child object, or giving it up, letting it expire to some degree. Though it may sound rather obnoxious, some women who lost their child try to shield themselves by distancing from initial, maternal identity.

Therese A. Rando (1991) calls this identity shift **a transition from identifying oneself as a parent of a living child to a parent of a deceased one**. What empowers such a task is talking with other people about deceased children, sharing memories connected with both the life and death of the offspring, but also through rituals such as grave tending, monitoring communication with people outside the instant family and friends circle, reaching others with similar experiences. All that supports negotiating bereaved identity towards accommodating the interaction loss, though to a degree, sustaining original, parental imprint (Toller, 2008).

Let us, however, delve into the very beginning of the transition process, when entering this undesired identity. An Australian-born Pulitzer Prize winner and art critic, Sebastian Smee (2022), says there are no adequate words to talk about the

death of a child since it “is too primal, too animalistic, too fundamentally incommunicable”. That is how he depicts an etching entitled *Woman With Dead Child* by Käthe Kollwitz in 1903. Kollwitz was an anti-war, anti-fascist and, as we would say today, a great feminist. Her piece (Figure 2), was made halfway between a past event of losing a brother and a future event of losing a son during the World War I.

Figure 1. *Woman With Dead Child*, 1903, by Käthe Kollwitz



Source: The Washington Post, Great Works In Focus 121.

It seems, in a manner of speaking, in the midst of two profound losses Kollwitz experienced, as we may read on the MoMA webpage advertising her exhibition this year. Smee's narrative on the piece is far more meticulous. He is able to recognize Kollwitz's intention not to be tactful when it comes to the composition. The mother goes all-out for the child, her efforts are visceral. The embrace is doomed to fail, her act is powerless, the child stays dead, the mother is unable to change the sequence, the child remains dead. There are no promises of resurrection. The death alienates the child and, what Smee has seized so incredibly, the mother seems monstrous, in the dark, as light stays with the dead, alienated child's body.

I believe Kollwitz drove the message home about the birth of the new identity of the bereaved mother. This very initial moment marks **the identity with**

a monstrous curve. We could call it a primal, almost embryonic manifestation of a bereaved mother's identity. A normal parental identity can be navigated by developmental changes happening in the family. Monstrous identity of the bereaved mother is unnavigable, so to speak, because there is no gear for it, no sails, no maps, no GPS, no stars in the sky, and the boat is sinking. No one has this sort of equipment, there is no "child's death encounter toolbox/first aid". This is why I suppose there exists a high risk of monstrous identity overshadowing other manifestations of maternal bereaved identity or identity as a whole. Especially if mothers remain unable to seek or accept support of any kind and/or if they continue to isolate themselves from the social world and remaining relationships. Scientific literature does not examine this identity. It revealed itself to me while I was listening to Ajahn Brahm's² talk "I Don't Own My Past" (2013). There, Brahm recalls meeting a woman who attended one of his talks on bereavement and approached him afterwards. She was furious with Brahm's outlook suggesting letting go of the past, including grief after losing a loved one. In an agitated manner, she kept saying she was a bereaved mother, plain and simple. She was no one else but a bereaved mother. She seemed as a hostage of something monstrous bending her identity, reducing it to pain, grief and endless bereavement only, unable to perceive other identities connected with non-maternal social roles.

Similar attitudes were to be observed while participating in the previously mentioned support groups for those who experienced the loss of a loved one, including a child. Some mothers I met there revealed similar approaches to their loss and living afterwards. The latter can hardly be called living, actually. They reported inability to continue to work, sustain relations with other members of intermediate family or friends and acquaintances. Their selfhood was condensed into bereavement as an only manifestation of life.

In spite of that monstrous "takeover", one other release or outpouring could have been observed, more vicious and insidious. It occurred in women who apparently were coping well, attending support group meetings, leaning on other family members, friends or even support programs at the workplace. Yet, all their activities were feigned and insincere. It was due to the fact that beneath all personal and social efforts of support they remained so deeply wounded that real support was neither perceived as well-deserved, due to mounting guilt experience, nor achievable because of denied "takeover" by monstrous identity. As in Kollwitz's work, the light (hope?) stayed with their lost child, but they remained dormant, often hidden not only from others, but also from themselves.

² He is a British-born Buddhist monk, currently operating in Western Australia, and the author of many publications on tackling life challenges.

For those mothers, digressions concerning the meaning of staying alive lingered exclusively in their own mind, they were not spoken, despite having such a cathartic and liberating potential. The bond with grief, considered as their only link with their deceased children, takes over completely, deceitfully prompting ways to mask, in front of all other family members, friends and/or important others.

What is maternal bereavement identity like? Undoubtedly, there is no clear answer to that. Surely, it fades away as the physical link with a deceased child is no longer there, regardless of ritualised attempts to carry on with it by grave tending, keeping up memories, etc. I tend to recognize it rather in eternal dimensions and hope not all mothers would have a monstrous warp in their identities, as this does perpetuate their pain and make further living unbearable – not just for mothers alone but also for their other dear ones. Further, expanded empirical insight into the matter will surely provide more data and reflection on bereaved maternal identity.

5. LIMITATIONS

The paper focuses on maternal bereaved identity. Yet, as I stated at the beginning, mourning a child's death affects the entire family, both immediate and extended. It would be worth investigating the extended family, in particular, since to my knowledge at least, there is not enough scientific interest in this issue. Such analyses could include grandparents, cousins, and more distant family members in order to study their transitions, perhaps not their identity, but perhaps their position within the family, or possible individual repercussions.

Theory-wise, the paper does not integrate Goffman's inquiry into spoiled identity. I presume it would be better deserved in the paper, when connected with peer support of bereaved mothers, or parents in general.

Finally, the paper omits the subject of support available within family and friends' groups and/or formal and informal, i.e. in a form of (self-) support groups. Such a subject deserves extra attention in further analyses and insight, as it plays a vital role in bereavement for any individual.

CONCLUSIONS

Maternal identity does not come about effortlessly. On occasions, it takes toll on one's previous lifestyle habits, free time, and professional development. Nevertheless, once a woman enters motherhood, with its ups and downs, for a great

majority it becomes the most profound experience to observe how child(ren) progress along their own path of life, as they make their future. When deprived of the experience due to their child's death, bereaved mothers lose much of their parental identity. Some, with utmost difficulty, seek means to maintain it via rituals, memories, shifting their caring attention to the remaining children or ageing parents. Others dive into compulsive behaviours or exhaustive work, and others just stay petrified and utterly isolated from the world. This may happen when monstrous identity steals upon their own identity. A lot of effort is needed from other dear ones to provide comfort, and even more effort on the part of the bereaved mother to accept that. If both parties succeed, the monstrous identity may eventually give way to other identities to emerge or build up, allowing some time to pass, and accepting the fact that any kind of identity will be based on nothing more but actions *directed towards* the lost child and never again *done with* them.

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WYGASAJĄCA, WIECZNA CZY POTWORNA?
TOŻSAMOŚĆ MATEK W ŻAŁOBIE. WSTĘPNE OBSERWACJE

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie procesu zmian w tożsamości matek po stracie dziecka. Socjologicznej analizie zostaje poddane pojęcie tożsamości, w tym tożsamości matki. Przedstawiono historyczne i statystyczne tło przypadków utraty dziecka w wyniku jego śmierci. Artykuł podejmuje próbę wyjścia poza dotychczasowy stan wiedzy i opisów tożsamości matki w żałobie, proponując jeszcze inne spojrzenie, które wydaje się celowe dla dalszych zamierzonych badań, a mianowicie tożsamość, którą można określić mianem potwornej. Z metodologicznego punktu widzenia artykuł ma charakter przeglądu integracyjnego z elementami wstępnych obserwacji.

Słowa kluczowe: matki w żałobie; zmiana tożsamości; tożsamość potworna; śmierć i strata dziecka