

A CYBERNETIC APPROACH TO GRIEF:

An application of the cybernetic paradigm in the field of parental loss of a child.

by

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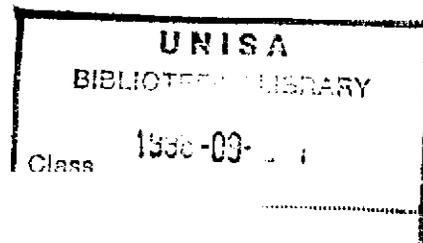
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SUMMARY

This study sets out to demonstrate the usefulness of cybernetic description for grief therapy, specifically the field parental loss of a child. This paradigm was used to facilitate an alternate mode of conceptualisation, one engendering a more encompassing, aesthetic view. The following core cybernetic concepts were used: punctuation, complementarity, pattern and metapattern forming the framework of cybernetic description as applied.

A literature study attempting to merge the gestalt of cybernetic description with that of bereavement theory, specifically that pertaining to the parental loss of a child, is presented.

A single case study is described illustrating how cybernetic description is applied to the grief narrative. Arising out of this, the implications of cybernetic description for the field of grief and social work in general are outlined.



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KEY TERMS

Cybernetic conceptualisation; Cybernetics; Aesthetic paradigm; Complementarity; Punctuation; Patterns; Levels of reality; Stability and change; Parental loss of a child; Grief process; Narrative

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CHAPTER 1

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND METHOD OF THE STUDY

"[T]he world we think we see is only a view, a description of the world."
Carlos Castenada in Keeney (1983:7)

"Everybody knows (or should know) that you cannot learn to dance by merely reading a book."
Gregory Bateson (1987:163)

INTRODUCTION

Telling one's story is a cornerstone of the therapeutic process. But the language used to tell the story and to conceptualise it is inherently incomplete and inescapably limiting. Discrepancies necessarily exist between the distinctions we draw in language and what we are trying to describe - a "description can never resemble the thing described, above all, the description can never be the thing described" (Bateson 1987:151).

In grief therapy the bereaved parent is encouraged to recount the death experience, recollect memories of and express feelings about the child. When the bereaved mother recounts the experience of her child's death, she does so through the use of descriptions in language. Given the tragedy and the enormity of the loss, she tends to use polarised and hyperbolic descriptions. Overwhelmed by the power of the story and the immediate empathy it evokes, the therapist struggles with the inadequacies of the common store of conceptual tools. Her stock of knowledge seems incomplete. She experiences difficulty in conceptualising the story in the face of the partial view pressed by the bereaved parent.

It is the need to develop concepts that can provide additional and alternative ways to express the experience and extent of the loss in grief work therapy that leads the therapist to explore other modes of conceptualisation. The therapist is motivated by the need for a more encompassing terminology with a better fit for the subject matter of grief. Cybernetic theory is concerned with how our communications fit the world of experience, the totality of living systems. It draws the conclusion that discrepancies necessarily exist between the distinctions we draw in language and what we are trying to describe. It further suggests that one's way of knowing is closely linked to personal experiencing.

Cybernetic epistemology may better inform the process of conceptualisation within the field of grief therapy. In my view this epistemology may go some way to retrieving what is lost in the common languaging of the grief experience. It is proposed that by employing cybernetic description, patterns and relationships can be created in the information and a more encompassing description of the grief narrative provided. Excited by the possibilities that this elicits for our way of knowing as therapists, this study intends to explore this approach in a limited way with Maria dos Santos' (assumed name) recounting of the loss of her son. It is this account that forms the basis of the study.

Finally, it is proposed that a holistic conceptualisation of loss will facilitate therapeutic understanding. By employing the cybernetic perspective, I will endeavour to examine the relevance of this aesthetic view for the grief process.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To describe the application of a cybernetic model to aspects of the grief process.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1 To describe the application of cybernetic theory in the context of the field of parental loss of a child.
- 2 To apply the following cybernetic concepts to the observed grief narrative:
 - punctuation
 - complementarity
 - pattern and meta-pattern.
- 3 To illustrate the usefulness of cybernetic epistemology in the field of parental loss of a child.

SUBJECT MATTER OF THE STUDY

The mother as parent is the subject of this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The nature of the study, the epistemology and the subject matter of grief, determine the selection of the research design. It follows that the views of cybernetic theorists regarding research should be briefly presented.

Bateson (1979) points to the limitations of a quantitative method of enquiry being applied to the subject of human beings and their interactions. He argues that the complexities of circularity and recursiveness cannot be explained by timeless logic. The limitations of deductive research for social work research have also been analysed by Rubin and Babbie (1989:45-47). They advocate the development of generalisations based on observation, using a more flexible research strategy.

In accordance with the value base of the non-linear perspective informing this study, a qualitative design is used. The characteristics of this research approach, description and participant observation fit the research problem of this study (Collins 1991).

In describing the ethics of observing, Keeney (1983) notes that it is not necessary to dispense with the advantages of a first-order view. However, he advocates awareness of self-reference - the reflexive activity of the knower - and an examination of the intentions that determine one's punctuations. Therefore the pragmatics of simple cybernetics are contextualised by a perspective that brings the researcher fully into view (Keeney 1983: 82). Bateson (1979) points to the importance of being aware that, as observer, one is always operating in the context of a self-recursive network and that epistemological purity is problematic and impossible to achieve.

Maturana (1991:47) commenting on the relationship between research and reflexivity emphasises the impossibility of observing an independent reality. Social processes are self-reflexive - research is driven by the need to understand our experience and everything that is brought forth as a result of scientific endeavour is integrated into our existence as human beings. This means that we must recognise the "operationality of reflection in language [!]n order to reflect we need to release that which we constitute in our distinctions as an object of reflections..." (1991:47).

The research is in the form of a case study. A case study is defined as an in-depth investigation of a single unit of treatment (Gilgan 1994:371). Yin (1989:23) defines it as an empirical inquiry that studies a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context where the boundary separating phenomenon and context is not clear. He argues that this research strategy retains the complexity of the social phenomena under investigation while contributing to the understanding of the characteristics of life-events in an holistic manner. It thus fits with the epistemology informing this study. In addition, the case study method will facilitate the study of parental bereavement and how it is lived and experienced by the parent.

I have applied Yin's components of research design to this study (Yin 1989).

The research question: Yin (1989:18) suggests that "how" and "why" questions typify the case study. Their explanatory and open-ended natures match the framework of qualitative research which poses the question "What's going on here, and why?". Cause-effect enquiry does not fall under the ambit of the epistemology under study. In the application of cybernetic theory to the grief narrative, "how" questions predominate:

- How does the client make distinctions?
- How can cybernetic conceptualisation be used to arrive at a more encompassing understanding of the experience of bereavement for the therapeutic process?

The focus of enquiry will be applied to the subject's construction of an "ecology of experience", namely her descriptions (Keeney 1983:48).

Research propositions. Discrepancies exist between what people say (language) and what they are trying to describe. This also holds true in descriptions of loss by bereaved parents. The basic research proposition is that cybernetic conceptualisation may be useful in generating a more encompassing understanding of the experience of bereavement.

Unit of analysis. In this study, the unit of analysis is the client's story. The data is collected in the form of personal descriptions of the experience of bereavement. The objective is to link cybernetic theory to the descriptions reflected in the story. Descriptions - the distinctions drawn and their cybernetic reworking - take precedence over the collection of data.

Linking data to propositions. This component is concerned with the logic linking the data to the research proposition. In this study, that logic is achieved by linking the story (the subject's descriptions) with cybernetic conceptualisation, generating alternative distinctions and creating a more encompassing view of bereavement.

Criteria for interpreting the findings. The case study design does not allow for precise or statistical interpretation of findings. The aim of the study is to explicate individual functioning rather than aggregate behaviour. The purpose is to collect rich data rather than data generalisable in some statistical sense. Accordingly, the comparison of different forms of description achieved by the merging of linear and cybernetic views will comprise the interpretation of the results.

The client, Maria dos Santos, was selected through her membership of The Compassionate Friends ('TCF'), a self-help group for bereaved parents. Maria is a mother whose unmarried son aged thirty, died unexpectedly. Personal details have been changed in the interest of confidentiality. Three interviews were conducted 18 months after the death of the son within the counselling context of TCF. The objective of the interviews is facilitating the re-telling of the story and validating the subjective experiences. The length of the interviews ranged from one to one and a quarter hours. The stated intention and initial request was for the client to share her story, her experience of loss and grief. The focus of the interview was on the client's concerns and experiences. Thus the data is the personal story, recollections and descriptions of feelings. Cybernetic theory was then applied to the material obtained in the sessions. Therefor the therapist will be referred to in the study as the researcher (the researcher held the dual roles of counsellor and researcher).

Permission was obtained to audiotape the interviews and use the material for this study. The taped interviews have been transcribed. Extracts of the transcription constitute the addendum to this study.

The data (story) was viewed from a cybernetic perspective. A cybernetic framework was mapped onto the participant's descriptions, merging the original perspective with that of cybernetic theory.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS

Cybernetic theory forms the frame of reference for this study. Although that theory is presented in the literature study in Chapter 2, the main concepts used in the study are briefly described below.

Aesthetic paradigm. Aesthetic in this context means being responsive to the pattern that connects. The paradigm structures the conceptualisation of those connections.

Constructivism. Cybernetics is grounded in constructivism. A brief introduction to this epistemology will inform our understanding of cybernetic premises in general.

The central premise of constructivism is that a precise correspondence between our descriptions and total understanding of the world is not attainable. Constructivism asserts that knowledge reflects an organisation of a world constituted by subjective experience. It posits that:

- all understanding and communication is a matter of interpretative construction on the part of the experiencing subject; and
- that we compute descriptions of reality.

This paradigm asserts that knowledge is actively built up by the cognising subject, in the interest of adaptation to the experiential world (von Glasersfeld 1988). Radical constructivism recognises the interpersonal nature of human knowledge in determining what is known and that realities are constructed as a result of the relationship between the experiencing subject and what is experienced or observed. This illustrates the social character of our explanatory practices. It therefore places knowledge within the process of social interchange. Within this epistemology, the evolving and transitory character of what is known and the value-laden nature of beliefs is emphasised. It subscribes to the view of knowledge as the map of ways of doing and thinking which for the moment proves viable for the cognising subject (von Glasersfeld 1988). As a result, this paradigm invites the creation of alternative criteria for the process of evaluation (Gergen 1985). Problems become conceptual rather than empirical, which has the effect that a critical dialogue develops. It therefore generates a greater understanding of how individuals punctuate and transform their experiential reality.

Cybernetics. Cybernetics, spawned from science and mathematics, concerns itself with an examination of patterns of control, recursiveness and information. The term 'recursive' is descriptive of the feedback relationship sequence between variables. It is depicted by ABCA in which the outcome of previous functioning is used to adjust future functioning. This description illustrates the self-referential nature of cybernetics (Keeney 1983). It is the opposite of a linear epistemology that yields a hierarchic description: ABC. The cybernetic process is linked to the premise that "pattern organises physical and mental process" (Keeney, 1983:64). Pattern and relationship is the central focus of this paradigm. Cybernetic systems are patterns of organisation maintaining constancy and change through the complementary processes of stability and change (Keeney 1983:73).

Cybernetic framework. The cybernetic framework includes three interrelated concepts - punctuation, complementarity and pattern.

Punctuation. Basic to an understanding of epistemology is the making of a distinction - how we punctuate our world. The drawing of a distinction is a fundamental act of the process of knowing.

Complementarity. This form of description assumes that distinctions can be structured in terms of pairs and emphasises the connection between things. It embraces both sides of any distinction that an observer might draw. The aggregate summation is then more than a summation (Bateson 1979:100). The term complementarity is used interchangeably with double description and binocular vision.

Stability/change complementarity. Change and stability represent a complimentary gestalt in cybernetics. A cybernetic system is seen as comprising a recursive complementary relation between processes of change and processes of stability.

Complementarity of levels. Levels of reality are represented in a complementary model in which a particular reality is perceived in relationship with other realities. This imprecation of levels refers to the subjective construction of reality (Varela 1976)

Pattern. The term refers to an aggregate whose parts are arranged in such a way that they can be economically specified (Bateson & Bateson 1987:210).

Description. Description is used to articulate, in language, one's subjective experiences so that they may be shared and become known.

Epistemology. This term can be defined as "the necessary limits and other characteristics of the processes of knowing, thinking and deciding" (Bateson, 1979: 242). Keeney (1983:17) argues that "how one knows is inseparable from what one knows".

Parental grief. Traditional criteria used for classifying pathological grief are themselves standard components of parental bereavement (Rando, 1991). As a result the expectations deemed appropriate for normal grief are inappropriate when applied to bereaved parents. A seminal component of parental grief is the search for meaning - the need to make sense of the experience of loss. Because of the unnaturalness of losing a child within our culture, bereaved parents are often left with overwhelming questions and a quest for meaning (Rando, 1991).

Parental loss of a child. Parental loss of a child refers to the unique type of bereavement that occurs following the death of a child. Rando (1991) attempts to capture the complexity of grieving the death of a child. She reasons that parental attachment represents both love for the child and self-love. Consequently, mourning the loss of one's child involves mourning the loss of parts of oneself. In addition, the loss is seen as a violation of one of the basic functions of being an adult - that of protector. One significance of the death is that it is perceived as defying the laws of nature.

Story. The story is a recital of events that have or are alleged to have happened. Descriptions comprise the larger part of the story. In cybernetic terms, a story is "a little knot or complex of that species of connectedness which we call relevance." It is interchangeably referred to as the "narratives of the mind", (Bateson 1979:24).

CONTENT OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 This chapter aims to:

- indicate the scope and objectives of the study. Namely, the use of cybernetic conceptualisation as a tool for describing aspects of parental grief.
- set out the proposed research method.
- explain and define the paradigms and concepts;

Chapter 2 This chapter contains the theoretical background upon which the study is based. The literature regarding cybernetic gestalt will be presented as it relates to cybernetic description. The chapter will also address the views of bereavement theorists regarding the descriptions of experience in the parental loss of a child.

Chapter 3 This chapter outlines the case study analysis. This is followed by a summary of the usefulness of cybernetic description and its relevance for social work. It concludes with recommendations.

Addendum The addendum contains extracts of the transcribed interviews with the client.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The first objective of this chapter is to examine the literature on cybernetic description. Existing ideas regarding the constructs comprising this description, namely punctuation, complementarity, stability and change, patterns and meta-patterns, will be presented. The second objective will be to present the views of authors writing on the parental loss of a child. And the third objective will be to link this literature with cybernetic theory.

LITERATURE ON CYBERNETIC DESCRIPTION

The major proponent of cybernetic epistemology was Gregory Bateson. Bateson (1979) adopted a cybernetic world of description in attempting to come to grips with personal and social change. He argued this to be the appropriate epistemological foundation for talking about personal and social change. His theory proposed the unity of mind and nature. This formulation of mind provided a framework for defining disciplines of communication. Bateson strove to construct an epistemology and a language that could adequately describe the complexity of living systems.

Bateson advocated a paradigm that affirms the complexity of separate views, while simultaneously recognising the benefits of merging these differing perspectives. He reasoned that the network of mind must evolve towards "a semi-stable system of maximum differentiation" (Bateson 1987:175). To this end, he welcomed the synthesis of both sides of any interface.

An aesthetic stance is seminal to his theory. It follows that wholeness and sensitivity to the connectedness of things characterise this way of knowing. Fundamental concepts that are both structured by and a product of this epistemology are:

- punctuation
- complementarity
- pattern and meta-pattern

These constructs of Bateson's theory are interrelated and comprise the framework of cybernetic description that will be applied in this study.

Punctuation. This construct refers to how we come to know the world. Bateson (1972) highlights the role of drawing distinctions ('punctuating') in how we come to perceive and know the world. He states that habitual patterns of punctuation order our experience. This is a recursive operation that serves to entrench a specific reality, subjectively drawn.

Bateson argues that the ideas regarding an event ("what the mind makes of it") is an unconscious process based on presuppositions. He notes that experiencing is always mediated by sense-organs and mind-processes. This coding of events is based on an epistemology that is mostly unconscious. He advocates awareness of this process.

In examining how we come to know, its characteristics and limitations, Bateson (1979:16) observes that "nothing can be understood until *differences* and *distinctions* are invoked". Bateson asserts that our explanations remain subjective, based as they are on descriptions that themselves are limited by the arbitrary and subjective nature of the process. He concludes that our perceptions are inextricably linked with how we draw a distinction.

A related proposition is "the map is not the territory" (Bateson 1979:36). Bateson maintains that the map or representation that each one constructs within himself, is not reality itself. It remains merely a representation. He argues that the event is not the thing named. Rather what is named is our constructions and ideas concerning it. He posits that our attempts at making meaning are changeable guidelines for understanding life.

Bateson maintains that the epistemological "knife" of language distorts and limits our descriptions. Proposition 15 (Bateson 1979:72) which forms part of his 'truths' reads: "Language commonly stresses only one side of any interaction" and thereby negates relationship. Thus statements tend to be dormitive - they tend to refer to only one half of a personality characteristic being localised within the individual.

In his quest for wholeness, Bateson saw the need for complete descriptions to capture the complexity of living organisms. He posits the need for a language that reflects both –

- the internal and external relations and interactions of things; and
- the descriptions of interactions over time.

Double description. Double-description is a logical consequence of this aesthetic view which stresses the relationships between things - "the pattern that connects" (Bateson 1979:16). By means of this view, each side of a conceptual distinction becomes fused to produce a higher order view - that of complementarities (Keeney & Ross 1983:376). Double description is an epistemological tool that provides a way of generating and discerning different orders of pattern. The premise is that two or more sources of information used conjointly provide information different from each separate source. Bateson (1979:99) maintains that combining information produces "something more than addition. The aggregate is greater than the sum of its parts." The result is an increment in knowledge. Bateson (1979:31) attests to the value of successive pieces and layers of information in developing an aesthetic description. He uses the term "complementary" to describe classes of process and differentiation that are different but mutually fit together in promoting each other, for example 'dominance-submission'. The process of creating complementarities shifts the perception from disjoint pairs to their unity on a meta-level. Double description is a holistic way of viewing pairs. It differs from linear description which emphasises the property of dualism and negation: *A/not A*.

In adopting descriptions which include relationship, the difference between things becomes apparent. This juxtaposing of descriptions creates "news of a difference" (Bateson, 1979:78). A new dimension of information is thereby generated.

Bateson argues that language constrains our ability to know. Habits of punctuation commonly take into account extracted halves of any concept. In contrast, double description facilitates the use of language to achieve higher order descriptions. He urges a focusing on the whole concept, that is, the connectedness between distinctions (extracted halves). In applying this more encompassing frame to the grief process then, one aspect would be that looking at death includes looking at life, and vice versa. This increment in insight encourages the view that death is not only death and life is not only life. The two constructs only exist in relationship. In consequence their parameters become broader and an aesthetic view becomes possible. Applying double description, each distinction is seen as a partial embodiment of the whole picture (Keeney 1983:3).

Thus the logic of complementarity transcends the symmetrical negation of either/or dichotomies. The resulting synthesis of information produces "multiple versions of the world" (Bateson 1979:77).

Stability and change. Bateson draws on the above core concepts in developing his theory regarding the cybernetics of change. He uses 'stability' and 'change' as examples of incomplete description. He asserts that when they are conceptualised together they provide a cybernetic description that is able to completely describe the self-corrective processes of stability and change. Thus, he presents a complementary view of the processes of stability and change (Keeney 1983). This view necessarily embraces the concept of feedback. Bateson's conceptualisation illustrates how the interlinked parts change to keep the whole autonomous: change is understood as part of the effort to achieve constancy, and stability in turn is maintained through change. Accordingly, a cybernetic system is seen as comprising a recursive complementary relation between these processes. The complex layers of connected recursive or circular processes make up cybernetic systems.

Pattern. In adopting an aesthetic paradigm, Bateson (1979; 1987) is acutely responsive to the pattern which connects. Things are not defined in contrast to other things, but through their relationship with things. Expanding this idea, Bateson examines patterns as they exist through time. He reasons that the formation of new patterns is dependent upon the receipt of information. The receipt of information is informed by the existing store of information, which provides the context of information. This context is a product of learning and history. He therefore concludes that the creation of meaning takes place within the context of established meaning.

Bateson contends that the making of meaning is conditioned by our epistemological premises. What we know is influenced by how we know. He posits that it is not the "thing in itself" (1979:20) that exists, but the thinking and ideas around it. As he says, "the name is not the thing named" (1979:37). He asserts that describing one's experience (the drawing of distinctions) is a way of making sense of our experience: "nothing can be understood until differences and distinctions are invoked" (1979:16). Narrative is the process of making meaning of one's experience.

To summarise, Bateson proposes that our constructions of reality or truth remain approximations - 'maps' (Bateson, 1979:20). He introduces the idea of epistemology as the recursive process of the drawing of a distinction for the purpose of describing one's world. Language is the medium of description. He observes that our habit of drawing distinctions however, often neglects relationship and constrains description. He advocates a language of complementarity in order to capture the facet of relationship that characterises this binocular view. To this end, Bateson shifts from a description of behaviour to that of context and relationship. For Bateson, the relationship between concepts is seminal to his vision of wholeness. This aesthetic view facilitates an understanding of the pattern underlying dichotomies. The patterns linking ideas together are, he says, the closest indication of ultimate truth.

Varela (1976:63) offers an alternative framework for understanding concepts. He presents formulae that provide a compact expression of cybernetic complementarity. The formulae describe distinctions within a layered relationship between the whole and the parts or holism and reductionism.

One such formulation is **COMPLEMENTARITY/whole/parts**. The slash is positioned between two sides of a more encompassing distinction, denoting a recursive relationship between the concepts - a simultaneous separation and connection of the distinctions. The whole is always in meta-relationship with its parts. The shape of this relationship is referred to as imbricated or overlapping. The self-referential characteristic of the separation/connection complementarity generates a way of understanding such whole/part recursiveness.

The imbricated complementarity can be compiled as: *completion/(connection/separation)*. This contextualises distinctions in terms of the connections of their separations and the separations of their connections. The separation and breaking down of the conceptual distinctions illustrates the relationship between distinctions.

Building on Bateson's construct of double description, Varela (1976:63) developed a formulation of double description which included the notion of trinity: **COMPLEMENTARITY: it/process leading to it**. This formulation focuses on the meta-level of dualities revealing their underlying unity. This unity is descriptive of a relatedness rather than a synthesis: *both/and*.

He emphasised the recursive relationship between each distinction that makes up the double description. The third component is the manner in which two distinctions are related while remaining separate. Thus: *trinity = the it / and the process leading to it.*

Varela (1976:64) also introduced the concept of levels of reality. A level can be viewed as a step in a ladder of imbricated distinctions. Levels however further indicate movement in thought process ascending and descending between the levels. This offers a different and extended perspective on opposites and their meaning. This view of complementarity fosters a binocular view. Either/or distinctions become what Bateson calls 'both/and'. The imbrication of levels thereby reflects the recursive relatedness of distinctions (Varela, 1976).

In addition, Varela's exposition of levels illustrates the subjective nature of the construction of realities - that for any accepted reality a variety of other realities are possible. This leads him to conclude that various levels of reality are contained in any reality. He expresses this in his formulation (1976:65): *a reality / levels of reality.*

Maturana (1987 & 1975) adopts a complementary view to explain the praxis of living. The notion of structural coupling between a unit and its medium is descriptive of the complementary interactions inherent in this relationship or coupling. Maturana and Varela (1987) concur with Bateson's proposition that the basic epistemological act of an observer is the drawing of a distinction: an "ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself" (Bateson 1987:11). However they add that this "bringing forth" takes place "in language". Maturana (1987) focuses on the central role of language in our experiencing of the world: .."everything that takes place in the praxis of living of the observer, takes place as a distinction in language" (1987:74). It is therefore through language that we observe ourselves and ourselves observing. Through the process of linguistic recursion self-consciousness in language occurs (1987:74). He concurs with Bateson's premise that an event occurs in language while simultaneously obscuring the process of distinction that structured it.

Writing on objectivity, Maturana contends that "existence is constitutively dependent on the observer and that there are as many domains of truth as domains of existence, she or he brings forth in her or his distinctions" (1987:332). The attributions of so-called reality are only of value in the language domain in which they are created. By understanding how we initially

constructed differences in the process of making distinctions, we may arrive at an understanding of our experiences and "reality". This links with Bateson's views-

- that all experience is subjective and unconscious;
- on second order cybernetics; and
- that the map is not the territory.

Keeney's work explicitly connects Bateson's cybernetic theory to the work of cyberneticians such as Varela and Von Foerster. Keeney (1983) elaborated Bateson's ideas of double-description in presenting his aesthetics of stability and change. Drawing on Varela's and Bateson's conceptualisation of cybernetic complementarity, Keeney developed a theory of therapeutic practice. This facilitated a holistic way of working with patterns of complementarities. His therapeutic model points to an aesthetic understanding of change, that is, a holistic change both in experiencing and behaviour.

Following Varela, Keeney's (1983:92) graphic formulation of cybernetic complementarity is:

- *whole/parts*
- *it/process leading to it*
- *distinction/its polar opposite*

Keeney's work is characteristic of the paradigm shift to holism. It is an inclusive view that takes cognisance of the broader ecosystem within which complementarity takes place. A related area of concern is how individuals participate in constructing their experiential reality. He shared the view that this reality is subjectively construed. Keeney asserts that cybernetics provides a radically different worldview, in which any distinction is in itself a distinction drawn on distinctions (Keeney 1983).

Keeney (1983:24) states that by "distinguishing one pattern from another...we are able to know our world". Related to this is the conceptualisation of the drawing of a distinction. The distinctions or punctuations of sequences of experience allow us to discern our world. The drawing of a distinction is the basic creative act of how we come to know our world (1983:18). For example by attending to the linear sequence of events, we can order and describe our world in a particular way. However, because the boundaries of distinguishing and naming are subjectively drawn, different demarcations are possible. That is, by attending

to the recursive sequence of the same events, an alternative punctuation of the same social context can be created.

In his discussion on constructing a reality Keeney (1983:46) modifies Bateson's paradigm of form and process. While he echoes the proposition "the name is not the thing named", he constructs a different terminology. Where Bateson refers to "description of process" Keeney uses "sensory based description" and replaces the concept "classification of form" with "skeletons of symbolic relations". By this is meant the internalised symbol system, like language, which prescribes the encountering of reality (1983:46). This terminology illustrates more clearly the recursive operation between our punctuations of sensory based descriptions and mind. The distinctions drawn reflexively describe the subject drawing the distinction and the manner in which he constructs and maintains his reality. Access to this symbol system is limited to the descriptions - distinctions of distinctions. Keeney's proposition of the recursive drawing of distinctions explains how we construct an ecology of experience.

Keeney (1983:20) spells out the implications for therapy of this way of thinking: "The observer first distinguishes and then describes". He highlights the recursive process of description and prescription. Individuals create their story through the epistemological distinctions that they draw. This is a cybernetic process of observing, perceiving and representation. Thus the individual's reality becomes recursively constructed; the individual description is linked with the describer and vice versa. Within this view, the distinctions, 'life' and 'death', are representations of a cultural and personal view. The meaning and experiencing of 'death' and 'life' then is linked to both shared meaning and the process of personal ascription.

Keeney (1983:27) concluded that "therapy can be defined as a context wherein social premises (usually unconscious) regarding punctuation may be altered". He reasoned that habits of punctuation characterise particular ways of shaping one's social context. This influences ways of knowing. He placed great store on reframing the client's frame of reference as a means to co-construct reality and thereby, behaviour patterns. Keeney was interested in the role that the therapist's own distinctions play in co-constructing a therapeutic reality.

Keeney (1983) reiterates Bateson's belief in double description as an epistemological tool facilitating both the generation and discernment of different orders of pattern. Further, he points to this way of conceptualising as a means to avoid the constraints of language and to achieve descriptions of a higher order. He proposes that conceptual distinctions can be fused to achieve a higher order view. That is, by shifting descriptions from behaviour to context, a description of interaction becomes possible and a leap in descriptive expression is realised.

Keeney (1983) notes that by focusing on the circular organisation of the same events patterns emerge and the conceptualisation of meta-patterns ensues. This engenders a greater complexity of description. He argues that this is the more complete view - the cybernetic view.

In his model, Keeney (1983) employs cybernetic complementarity as a way of conceptualising the organisation of change and stability in therapy. He uses the construct 'stability' to describe the system's efforts to maintain autonomy. Stability is ensured by means of continual change processes and change is achieved in relation to stability mechanisms. Change relates to the construction of different structures and patterns in the service of the autonomy of the system. Keeney and Ross (1983) explain that the processes of change and stability are viewed as related sides of a cybernetic complementarity. These processes cannot be separated. Keeney represents Bateson's complementary construct thus: *cybernetic system = (stability/change)*.

Watzlawick's (1984) writing reflects a concern for epistemological assumptions and the punctuation of the sequence of events. He applies himself to the question of how the construction of different realities i.e. epistemologies affects systems of interaction. A different punctuation or relabelling will affect the frame of reference of the behaviour. Watzlawick is interested specifically in shifting the frame of reference away from a linear view to one representative of the recursive process. The example of the 'withdraw/nag' sequence provides a complementary cybernetic description of a particular interaction. This resonates with Keeney's work on complementarity.

BEREAVEMENT THEORISTS

The knowledge base of bereavement theory is largely grounded in conjugal loss. The limitation of this knowledge for the specific field of parental loss has been recognised (Klass 1993; Rando 1991). It is now commonly acknowledged that the characteristics of the parent-child relationship are complicating factors in parental mourning, that need to be taken into consideration in forming a parental loss model (Rando 1991). Recognition of this has resulted in the growth in the relatively recent area of specialisation - parental bereavement. Existing literature documents the experience of this particular loss attempting to extract common themes. It is concerned with individual and idiosyncratic responses to the loss of a child over time.

Stage-based theories tend to dominate this area of knowledge (Worden 1983; Kubler-Ross 1975). Research on parental grief has increasingly led to a questioning of parental bereavement as occurring in predictable stages of hierarchy. It has also tended to contradict the implication this model presents, namely that a final stage of resolution is reached. This has fuelled the attempt to construct a specific model of parental mourning, one reflecting the complexities and uniqueness of this particular loss (Rando 1991).

No examples of cybernetic thinking have been found in the field of grief or parental grief theory. The epistemological stance of theorists writing on grief tends to positivism. It leads one to conjecture, echoing Bateson (1979:77), "what bonus or increment of knowing.." would accrue to this body of knowledge from a merging of different epistemologies? It is hoped that this study will go some way to answering this. The examination of bereavement literature that follows is guided by Bateson's (1979:77) stance on the enrichment in combining views.

The works of the authors included here will be examined to illustrate how their conceptualisations contribute to the matter under study. Guided by the dictum of what Bateson calls 'both-and' thinking, their contributions will be both critically examined and extended in terms of a cybernetic view.

The work of Caplan and Lang (1995:68) is concerned with specific findings regarding parental responses to the loss of their children. They created the metaphorical concept "trapezing" in documenting the process of holding on and letting go in grieving. They regard

this construct as characteristic of the phase of grief work concerned with "redefining the present" (1995:67). This phase refers to the bereaved's response of holding on to the memories and positive legacy of the deceased child while simultaneously endeavouring to let go of the pain of the past.

This metaphor of the trapeze artist letting go and holding on to different swings correlates with Bateson's (1979:74) description of the high-wire-acrobat remaining stable by continually correcting his imbalance - the cybernetic complementarity of stability and change.

While the authors do not explore complementarities, their writing frequently makes reference to relationships. For example they situate the bereaved person as central in the connection with the past and future. A further example is that the authors explore the restructuring of relationships as a component of recreating one's life as a bereaved person. In this context, the change in the relationship, what Caplan & Lang (1995:87) refer to as "the new normal", is described in terms of the dynamics of the erstwhile relationship (stability). As mentioned above, this complementary view remains veiled.

Caplan & Lang (1995) examine the concept 'bond' as it develops into 'bondage' in mourning. They regard the inability to relinquish past attachments and hopes as holding the parent back from adjusting to the loss and reorienting to living. Applying cybernetic complementarity to this concept, the formula *'it and the process leading to it'* (Varela 1976; Keeney 1983) may be rendered as 'bondage (it)/bond(process leading to it)'. By applying a cybernetic description to the concept an aesthetic vision of the relationship becomes possible, the relationship and its inherent pattern is made explicit.

In a similar vein, Caplan & Lang (1995:103) make a connection between death and life: "we learn from facing death something about how to live". Further, the authors describe the "continuity" that ensues from the legacy left behind by loved ones. They reason that the impact of the deceased's life on that of the bereaved is a continuing connection between parent and child. Cybernetic description would include the recursive dynamic characterising of this relationship, that is parent-child and child-parent interactions - in the form of memories and ongoing validation mechanisms. It would also encompass the stability/change dynamic.

Rando's writing (1991) reflects a sensitivity to the interactions between systems. Her synthesis of theory and empirical studies provides a significant contribution to the body of knowledge of parental grief and the nature of grief work in general. Definitions of grief work vary in accordance with the theorist's epistemology. The definition offered by Carson, Butcher & Coleman (1988:G-8) demonstrates a positivist position:

"Grief work: Necessary period of mourning for an individual to assimilate personal loss into the self structure and view it as an event of the past."

While declining to define grief work, however, the meaning of grief for Rando (1991:343) is:

"The process of psychological, social and somatic reactions to the perception of loss".

A cybernetic definition of grief work might include:

- the description of a period of time (indicating that this is a punctuation) and link it to personal loss;
- the fact that it is seen as the drawing of distinctions to describe the experience; and
- the recursive connection of this event with the stability/change dynamic and the metapatterning of parental experiencing, in achieving a new stability.

Rando (1991:344) quotes Worden's list of tasks in grief work:

- acceptance of the reality of the loss;
- experiencing the pain of grief;
- adjustment to an environment in which the deceased is missing and withdrawal of emotional energy; and
- reinvestment of it in another relationship.

She takes issue with this model as being more applicable to conjugal mourning. Her reworking of this list of tasks stems from her focus on the inner world of the bereaved parent. While her examination of experiencing shows some similarity with Keeney's "skeletons of symbolic relations" (1983: 46), her conceptualisation fails to include the recursive interactive process of experiencing. Rando's additions to the tasks of grief work are:

- de cathexis - the detaching of memories and hopes from the deceased;
- the development of a new relationship with the deceased child; and
- the formation of a new identity.

Mapping cybernetic forms of description onto Rando's more linear distinctions, an alternative view of the latter two tasks is achieved. Rando describes the development of a new relationship as "relinquishing the concrete loving of a present person and replacing it with the abstract loving of the absent deceased." This useful (albeit dualistic) description can be merged with the cybernetic view to include the recursive complementarity of the process.

In discussing the second task of grief work, the author refers to the formation of a new identity. She explains that changes in the bereaved parent's identity are a result of changes in the assumptive world, following the loss. Using cybernetic description, this cause-effect proposition can be transcended. Due regard for the stability/change dynamic would generate a view of the circular process underlying the formation of a new identity. The constancy in identity would be recursively linked with the change in identity and vice versa.

Rando's vision is to develop grief resolution practices. By this she means "reaching a psycho-social point of adjustment to a death so that life can go on" (1991:89). A cybernetic view would present a holistic description of the process, encompassing the complementarity of change and stability of "adjustment". The latter term does not fit with cybernetic description and could be replaced with the more holistic concept "experiencing".

Rando states that the primary task of mourning is relinquishing the attachment to the deceased and reinvesting in another relationship (1991:49). These tasks are presented as mutually incompatible. By introducing relation (connecting the distinctions "relinquishing" and "reinvesting") the inherent relationship is illustrated and a more encompassing conceptualisation of the mourning process is created.

Stressing the importance of eliciting the mother's story, the author makes mention of "the life and death" of the child. This distinction is a double description. This conceptualisation encourages the complementarity: existence: life and death - representing the totality of the child. The aesthetic view would further link the existence of the child with that of the mother, creating a more encompassing experiencing.

Rando describes the parents' search for meaning that follows the death. The experience of loss relates to feelings of loss of control over the world - the death of a child symbolises a chaotic universe. She maintains that a lack of consistency in the bereaved's value system from pre-trauma to post-trauma results in a sense of injustice and pain. This statement alludes to the connection and complementary relationship between the two value systems. It also hints at the change/stability component as it is affected by events and time (a veiled reference to recursion). This resonates with Keeney's (1983:46) reference to the complementarity between old and new meanings and the recursion between senses and symbols of the mind.

Rando's chapter on professional treatment, describes the process of "growing up with the loss" (1991:393). By this she refers to the triggers of acute grief experienced by the bereaved at each milestone of the deceased child's now-phantom life. For example the increase in grief felt by the parent triggered by the child's birth date or projected graduation. Rando describes the fluctuations in emotions and in the progression of grief work as a waxing and waning. Her metaphor is a veiled reference to the dynamic of stability and change. Her metaphor resonates with Klass's (1993) reference to the "roller coaster" experience of mourning and the grief process as "two steps forward, one step back".

The language used tends to obscure a holistic view of the grief process. The author refers to extracted halves such as "hang on" (1991:404) thereby neglecting its relationship with its polar opposite "letting go". If complementary description was introduced, Rando's analogy of "personal growth" (1991:30) would capture the loss/gain and stability/change dynamic inherent in the description.

Klass (1993) asserts that the parents' worldview is challenged by the trauma of a child's death. He describes the bereaved as engaged in either reaffirming or modifying their basic assumptions about themselves and about their world. He reasons that worldviews are experiential in that they are used as guidelines:

"[T]hey are the map of both visible and invisible reality on which individuals locate external and internal events... a collection of symbols..." (1993:256).

His construct "map" and the conceptualisation regarding the process of coding echoes that of Bateson (1979:37 and 208) - "the map is not the territory" "classification of form" and Keeney (1983:46) - "sensory-based experience....skeletons of symbolic formation". Characterising worldviews as "experiential" suggests the self-referential and non-static nature of the construction of reality.

Klass (1993) maintains that these tasks of affirming or remoulding a worldview interlink with the parents' continuing interactions with the inner representation of the child. This terminology implies the recursive process connecting parent and child. The author contends that active interaction with this inner representation supports the sense of meaningfulness that the parent originally derived from the child. This interaction supports a continuation of this sense of meaning after the child's death. Merging this with a cybernetic form of description, namely the stability/change complementarity and the pattern of time, the metapattern of meaning-making can be described.

Brice (1991) writes on the phenomenon of maternal mourning. He views it as essentially paradoxical. On the one hand, the mother desires to separate from the death while, on the other, the behaviour of mourning serves to retain the connection with her child. Adopting a cybernetic view, it is the author's epistemology that creates the paradox. Brice adopts an either-or view in which the behaviour of mourning is seen as negating the project to recover from the death. The employment of a different way of thinking would deliver a different conclusion. Cybernetic description takes into account the relatedness between the concepts 'separation' and 'connection' which allows the interactive pattern to emerge. Further, the stability/change dynamic operative in this complementarity "separation /connection" is acknowledged.

Brice (1991:26) argues that the mother's pain is in response to the finality of the loss and that this signifies the loss of her lived togetherness with her child. This togetherness can never exist again but from then on it "resides upon the horizon of" the mother's experience. Introducing the stability/change complementarity to this description, the change in relationship is shown to coexist with the stability in the relationship. That is, the mother's experience is interlinked with her ongoing relationship with her child. This relationship endures on the periphery of her experience -"the horizon".

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From the preceding study of the literature, it is possible to crystallise the nature of the study and clarify the nature of the constructs that will inform it. Although the study is grounded in cybernetic theory, it takes an integrated view of all the theorists discussed above.

For the purposes of this study, a cybernetic description of the grief narrative is adopted. Arising out of the literature study the following constructs form the framework for this description:

- punctuation
- complementarity
- pattern and metapattern

CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the descriptions arising from a case study in parental loss with the researcher as cybernetician. A specific grief narrative is the focus of the study. The researcher will now endeavour to link cybernetic theory to the story as it emerged from the grief narrative. In effect the theory map will be merged with the participant's own story.

Bearing in mind Bateson's proposition that any distinction is merely that - a particular view, I am aware of the limitations of my map (Bateson, 1979). Consequently, although cybernetics provides the framework within which the story will be viewed, the descriptions will necessarily reflect my views. Accordingly, I am mindful of the fact that I am drawing the boundaries of the unit of observation and that alternative punctuations are possible (Keeney 1983:47). This study is therefore my map of the participant's story employing the cybernetic perspective.

OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER

The seminal objective of the chapter is to apply cybernetic theory to aspects of the story. The epistemological tool used in this analysis is that of cybernetic description. The constructs comprising this mode of description are:

- *punctuation*
- *double description*
- *complementarity of stability and change*
- *levels of reality*
- *pattern and metapattern*

These constructs form the skeleton upon which the body of a cybernetic understanding of the story will be built.

This chapter accordingly includes:

- a synopsis of the bereaved mother's story of her grief;
- illustrations of the mapping of cybernetic conceptualisation;
- a discussion of the usefulness of this way of working for this study;
- reflections on the relevance of this epistemology for the field of grief in general;
- recommendations; and
- a conclusion.

SYNOPSIS OF STORY

Maria begins by sketching the family details and the circumstances relating to Ernesto's death. The story is interwoven with her accent on: her special relationship with this child - her favourite son; the function he provided; and her grief since his death. Much of her description pertains to her seminal role as a mother and caretaker. This function extends beyond the family into the community.

Maria and family live in Boksburg. They have lived here for thirty-three years. At the beginning of the story, the family comprises herself, her husband, Paulo, and her four adult children: Ernesto, Olivia, Joe and Anna. Olivia is the only child still living at home. She is eight months pregnant and unmarried. The family custom is that the three other children return to the family home on weekends.

On the weekend of 22 June 1995 the family celebrated the twenty-first birthday of Anna, the youngest child. Ernesto, described as very reliable, failed to arrive. His colleagues inform the family that Ernesto was last seen on the night of the 21 June. He is reported missing. On 23 June the police find Ernesto's body beside his overturned car under a bridge on a highway.

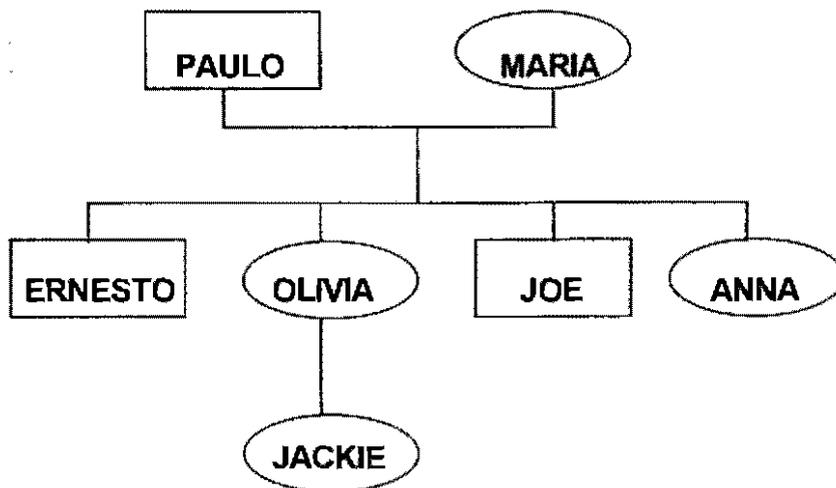
Throughout that traumatic weekend Maria is engaged in entertaining the large numbers of family and friends gathered for the occasion of Anna's birthday. When she receives the tragic news, her primary concern is to safeguard Olivia and her unborn grandchild. She tempers her outward show of grief. The baby is born two weeks after Ernesto's death. Maria's grieving is compounded by concern for the baby and her daughter.

Maria enjoys a large network of support as a result of her close involvement in the community and in volunteer organisations over the years. One of these is Hospice, an institution caring for the terminally ill. After Ernesto's death, the immediate support from these sources is enormous. In addition, she receives counselling from Hospice. After a period of time, she feels misunderstood by family and friends who are impatient for her to recover. Her sorrow at the loss of her favourite son is unbearable. She finds some solace in the self-help group for bereaved parents - The Compassionate Friends.

Maria's role as caretaker is of prime importance to her. She is a loving mother to her children, family and community. She enjoyed an especially close relationship with her eldest son, Ernesto. She dates this "special world" they had together from the time of his birth. This bond with Ernesto tends to overshadow her relationship with her other children.

The special relationship endures after Ernesto's death. He continues to influence her life. Maria admired his philosophy on life and now she endeavours to implement this in her own life. She feels she is changing and becoming a better person. Her appreciation of her surviving children has grown.

To introduce Maria a genogram representing her and her family is presented.



THEMATIC STRUCTURE OF THE STORY

Following the cybernetic paradigm's emphasis on *pattern* and its facilitation of clarity, Maria's story is summarised into themes represented by the *patterns*:

Caring. A recurring theme relates to her caring role in respect of her children, her family and her community.

Special bond. Related to this theme is the distinction *special* that characterises her relationship with Ernesto.

Pain. A major part of her story recounts the loss she experiences with Ernesto's death. *Pain* is the dominant *punctuation* linked to her grief.

APPLYING A CYBERNETIC DESCRIPTION

The dominant *distinctions* Maria draws structure the application of the cybernetic framework. The framework is mapped on these *punctuations*. Thus the descriptions Maria presents are conceptualised according to the specific cybernetic framework.

The cybernetic frame of reference encourages an inclusive view. Thus the process of cybernetic description will merge with that of parental loss theory providing an enriched view of the narrative.

It is Keeney's (1983:94) observation that the quest for an aesthetic paradigm is fuelled by the interplay between rigour and imagination. This observation grounds the cybernetic application to the story. Imagination will facilitate my thinking around the creation of alternative *distinctions*. Simultaneously, I will be guided by a judicious adherence to the cybernetic frame of reference. A brief outline of the method as applied will be outlined.

Maria's story refers to the relationship with her son before and after his death. In the interests of brevity, the period of Ernesto's life will be referred to as Life 1 and the period after his death as Life 2.

The questions that guide the application are as follows:

- What are the *distinctions* that Maria draws?
- How does *double description* affect these *distinctions*?
- What *patterns* emerge by implementing this binocular view?
- What creative descriptions evolve using the formulae for cybernetic complementarity and levels of reality?
- How is the *complementarity* of stability/change able to be applied to the patterns and *metapatterns*?
- What *metapatterns* emerge by focusing on the relationship between *patterns* over time?

Descriptions relating to pain:

Introducing alternative distinctions: In developing a cybernetic understanding of the drawing of the *distinction* "pain", Maria's subjective experience of the construct needs to be understood. Maria's story and related *punctuations* provide the context for understanding how the "higher order description" (Keeney 1983:38) - "pain" was derived:

"It was a painful, terrible thing when he died."

"I miss him so much."

"I long so to see his face."

"Nothing, nothing in life can be as bad."

"I just wanted to die."

"I will never be my old self...that joy...I no longer feel."

"Just tears, tears. As if someone took from me my most precious gift."

The thinking around "pain" is informed by the construct of *double description*. "Pain" is accordingly defined by its relation to other things and not by what it is in itself (Bateson, 1979). In the context of the story, "pain" relates to loss, change, longing, despair and sorrow.

By linking Maria's *punctuations* with the implied *punctuation*, the complementarity is able to be shown. Pain becomes related to joy:

"I miss him so"

["I loved being with him"]

"I long so to see his face"

["Before he died, I enjoyed being with him"]

"I will never be my old self..that joy...I no longer feel"

["I used to be filled with joy, now its a different life, bereft of joy"]

In reframing the *punctuation* "pain" cybernetically, the "both-and" descriptions (Bateson, 1979) comprising it are revealed. The often unstated opposite concept is spelt out. This illustrates the larger relationship *pattern* of which "pain" is an extracted half:

- pain and pleasure
- pain and peace
- pain and joy

Maria alludes to this complementarity:

"So I always have mixed emotions...if I'm very, very sad. I must have something of joy coming in. But if I'm full of joy I must have some sad coming in..."

"It was a painful, terrible thing when he died. I try to live all the joy, all the love of the years back."

Drawing on the above *distinctions*, the *double description* of the *punctuation* "pain" is:

- presence and absence
- having and losing
- connection and separation

- possessing and relinquishing.

Applying the complementary description "pain and joy" to the *double descriptions*:

- having (joy) and losing (pain)
- possessing (joy) and relinquishing (pain),

alternative views regarding this distinction are explored.

Varela's (1976) cybernetic formulation is applied using the complementary description of pain as "relinquishing/possessing":

COMPLEMENTARITY: *distinction/ its polar opposite.*

Tracking Maria's descriptions, the polarities regarding this distinction are paired. This generates a more encompassing understanding of the pain:

<u>Relinquishing</u>	<u>possessing</u>
"He's dead, he's gone"	"Often I fool myself that he is still in Jo'burg"
"I've lost the sound of his laugh, now"	"I try to live all the joy of the years back ...and I talk as if he's listening"

In connecting her *distinctions*, the following complementarity emerges:

- the need to hold on to the relationship with Ernesto (possessing);
- the impossibility of holding on as before (relinquishing).

Thinking around this theme is informed by grief theory. Here the distinction "letting go" (Rando, 1991:404) represents that stage in grief work - the relinquishing of relationship. Borrowing this *punctuation*, "letting go" can be computed as the polar opposite to "holding on" or "keeping Ernesto present".

Cybernetically speaking, "holding on" and "letting go" are each extracted halves of a relationship *pattern*, reflecting the *stability/change* dynamic. In terms of this view, Maria's

"pain" can be described as the anguish experienced by the need to maintain her erstwhile relationship with her son while simultaneously experiencing the changes involved in the loss. The stability in the relationship is recursively connected to the change in relationship - the loss of ties. This circular description of the process of reluctantly relinquishing the old relationship, while structuring a new one, is an aesthetic description of Maria's pain.

Using Varela's (1976) formula to compute complementarity:

Complementarity: *distinction/its polar opposite*

PAIN: *holding on/letting go*

The usefulness of this computation is that it points to the connection between these two types of behaviour and their recursion. That is, awareness of the initial distinction alerts one to the complete distinction, while taking into account the recursive relationship between them.

An alternative description of the distinction "pain" and the thinking around it can be constructed using Varela's (1976) formulation:

Complementarity: *it/the process leading to it*

It becomes possible to discover alternative *patterns* in the ecology of Maria's experience using this frame of reference. By seeing "pain" as connected to and in relation to the process leading up to it, Maria's distinction is linked to aspects of her story regarding the adjustments since Ernesto's absence: **PAIN:** *adjustment/loss of Ernesto*. Maria's struggle around "holding on and letting go" (adjustment) are represented in a recursive relationship with "the loss of Ernesto", thus forming the complementary picture.

Informed by the complementary view, the *pattern* of the mother-son relationship with regard to this distinction, can be revealed. That is, a binocular view with regard to "pain" extending over Life 1 and Life 2. This is achieved by applying the *stability/change complementarity* with regard to the complete distinction "having and losing". By means of this, the *pattern* of "pain" ("having" and "losing") characterising this relationship can emerge. This formulation attempts to answer the question: How has Maria been "holding on and letting go" of the relationship in Life 1 and in Life 2? Her *distinctions* are viewed with reference to this complementarity:

Life 1

Holding on

"...then when he finished studying he went to the army, his room was always there...and I would fetch him...or I would go to Sunday mass there to see him"

Letting Go

"when he finished school he went to the university, to the army. So I got used to slowly him being away..."

Life 2

Holding on

"I'm still his mother" "I don't ever want to forget him".

"that's what Ernesto said...and I'm trying to be that person";

"and I talk as if he's listening"

Letting Go

"I've stopped bargaining with God"

"but I accept that he is dead...nothing on this world can bring him back"

"Every Sunday I go to the cemetery...I know its just his remains there"

By merging the "pain" complementarities of both time periods one is collapsing time. In addition, sensitivity to recursion, illustrates the stability/change *pattern* between both mother and son. The *stability/change complementarity* is used to illustrate how old *patterns* of relating (stability) in Life 1 feed into the new *pattern* of relating (change) in Life 2 and how new *patterns* are built on old *patterns*.

Using the *double description* of *stability and change* the distinction "pain" is drawn in terms of the desire for stability (connection) and a resistance to change (separation). The whole reflects the mother-son relationship. The relationship can be represented according to Keeney's (1983) formulation of the stability/change dynamic as:

cybernetic system = (stability/change)



relationship = (stability/change)



The *distinctions* comprising Maria's story reveal that Ernesto validated his mother. This aspect of their relationship remains constant in Life 2. The change is the manner of validation. Maria is now the active agent. Her memory of her son's values now validates her and she continues to weigh her actions in terms of her memory of him. Thus he is still part of her life (stability) although in a different way (change):

"Let people see you for what you are...and I am trying to be that person"

"I appreciate more the beauty in things...he used to say Ma relax, take time off to smell the roses... I wish he could have seen this change..."

"and he would say, but Ma, less is more...he had to die for me to realise that"

Parental loss theory contends that the bereaved parent suffers the loss of those interactions that help define one's sense of self and reality. It posits that the bereaved parent continues to interact with the inner representation of the deceased (Klass 1993; Rando 1991). In conceptualising the *stability and change* in the distinction "pain", the combination of these two views is useful. A cybernetic view emphasises the recursive process of validation between mother and son.

DESCRIPTIONS RELATING TO "SPECIAL"

The *punctuation* "special" recurs throughout Maria's story:

"I've never had that bond with another human being".

"He was so special, so special".

"Being a mother to him was the best part of my life".

"My most precious gift".

"He was my favourite".

"It was the biggest privilege to be his mother"

"I was so proud"

"He was my son, my friend, my teacher."

Introducing alternative distinctions. Other *distinctions* relating to "special" are "primary" "foremost" and "unique". "Special" is a *punctuation* denoting an extracted half. The above *distinctions* contribute in developing an understanding of the larger relationship *pattern* of which "special" forms a part. A *double description* includes the polar opposite of "special" and "primary" hence: "ordinary" or "secondary importance".

Thinking around the distinction "special" is assisted by applying Varela's (1976) formula for forming complementarity:

Complementarity: *distinction/its polar opposite*

relationship : special / ordinary

special bond : priority of relationship with Ernesto/ secondary relationship with others

special : closeness / distance

Looking at the *distinctions* regarding "specialness" in relation to each other, the recursive connection between *distinctions* becomes evident. Maria punctuates this specialness by stating:

"He was my son, my friend, my teacher."

The *complementary* view highlights the recursive interactions between mother and son:

"He was my son (I was his mother), my friend (I was his friend), my teacher (I was his pupil)

Thus the reciprocal nature of the "specialness" and how it is sustained becomes revealed. Maria draws these *distinctions*:

"He always made me feel so special and I made him feel special",

Drawing on the above, a higher level of description can be achieved. Presenting both sides of *distinctions*, the *complementary* relationship becomes illustrated (Varela, 1976):

Complementarity: *distinction* / its polar opposite
special bond : special mother/special son

Further thinking around Maria's *punctuation* "special bond" is generated using Varela's (1976) formula of cybernetic complementarity.

Complementarity: *it* / process leading it to develop
Close relationship: special bond/ mother-son interactions.

Consequently, the recursive nature of this special relationship is again highlighted. Complementarity underscores the contributions of both mother and son in creating this special bond. By taking into account the process leading to it (the "interactions"), it is possible to arrive at a more complete understanding of this relationship.

Maria experiences a perforce change in the special relationship: "*its no longer there*". In terms of the *stability/change* dynamic, the cybernetic line of enquiry is how does it remain constant, while changing? One can go some way to answering this by linking Maria's poignant *distinctions* regarding the special relationship before and after her son's death:

"And every Friday I'd go to his home, he loved fresh flowers...tend to the washing...and he would pick up the 'phone and say "Mom thanks, you are a

star". (Life 1)

"I go every Sunday to the cemetery. I bring lovely flowers...and a lappie to wash the stone....I talk as if he's listening". (Life 2)

The *stability/change* dynamic spanning Life 1 and Life 2 can be conceptualised. In Life 2, the *pattern* although experienced as changed, remains constant. Ernesto remains the special child (stability) although the interactions relating to this "specialness" change. The change in the special relationship becomes counterbalanced by the creation of new behaviours to create constancy in the relationship.

DESCRIPTIONS RELATING TO CARING

Maria's *punctuation* of her caring behaviour unfolds throughout the story. She makes frequent reference to her role as a mother and active family and community member. The *distinctions* referring to "caring" in respect of her pregnant daughter and grandchild merge with her recounting of grief (*distinctions* of "pain"). These and other *distinctions* relating to "caring" follow:

"...the sacrifices I did for them"

"I never put myself first"

"For the sake of the baby, for Olivia"

"All my life I've given love and I'm a proud person. I rather give than receive"

"I was doing so much charity work because I believed in this, "I can't take, take. I must give back"

These *distinctions* synthesize into a description of caring as "caring for others plus Ernesto". Whereas "special" caring is reserved for Ernesto.

Introducing alternative distinctions. In attempting to achieve an holistic description, the opposite distinction to the one drawn, is introduced. The polar opposite of "caring" is "selfish" or "caring for self". Maria's *distinctions* themselves connect the opposites:

"I'm many things, a selfish person I'm not" and "I rather give than receive".
"sacrifice" versus "put myself first"

The *double description* of caring becomes "caring/selfish".

The *distinctions* and their implied opposite messages are presented:

<i>"..the sacrifices I did for them"</i>	<i>["what I went without"]</i>
<i>"I never put myself first"</i>	<i>["I always put others first"]</i>
<i>"for the sake of the baby, for Olivia"</i>	<i>["rather than for my own sake"]</i>
<i>"I believed in this, I can't take, take"</i>	<i>["I must give back"]</i>

By means of this *double description* "caring for others/caring for self" the dynamic of Maria's experience is discerned. (A closer examination of this will be presented in the following section on *meta-pattern*).

It is useful to map the cybernetic complementarity of which the distinction "caring" is a part. Thinking around this is assisted by applying Varela's (1976) formula for complementarity:

Complementarity: it/ process leading to it
Caring : caring for others/caring for self
Caring : caring for Ernesto/caring for self

The formula points to the recursive nature of the process.

In developing a cybernetic understanding of the *punctuation* "caring", the component parts and their recursion are central. Looking at the *distinctions* with the aid of *double description*, it is possible to compute the complementary *distinctions*:

- giving/receiving

- sacrifice/self-interest
- selfish/caring.

Using the definition of cybernetic complementarity as whole/parts, a complete description of the distinction "caring" is able to be evolved.

Complementarity: whole / parts

Caring : Caring role / caring as: mother of E, mother, wife, community worker, friend, self

The complementarity is comprised of the *punctuation* "caring"; Maria's caring role is the whole, the *complementary* parts are identified from her *distinctions*.

Complementary description "draws a *pattern* of recursion" connecting both sides of any distinction creating a multi-dimensional view (Keeney 1983:111). Thus Maria's caring role is no longer seen as one-dimensional. The role is revealed in its multiplicity of functions, one important function of which is "mother of Ernesto". This promotes a more encompassing picture of Maria's caring.

In addition, the recursive process draws attention to the interactions inherent in the "caring" relationship: caring for others becomes linked with receiving from others and caring for self. Maria's *punctuation* "I needed to do things for him, this terrible need", can be connected with the implied message. The complete distinction then reads:

"I needed to do things for him, this terrible need" - ["to do for me"]. Or ["By doing for him, I was doing for me."]

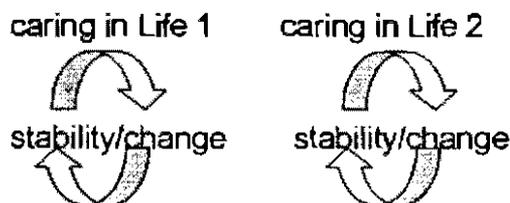
"And every Friday I'd go to his home,..." - "and... he would.. say "Mom, thanks you are a star".

A complementary view of Maria's *punctuations* links caring for others with self-care. Thus the *stability/change* dynamic is illustrated as is the metapattern of behaving and relating: Maria takes care of herself by caring for others in Life 1 as she is in Life 2. What has changed is the behaviour.

The separation and breaking down of the conceptual *distinctions* serve the purpose of illustrating the connections between them. This further facilitates an examination of the *stability/change* dynamic as it relates to Maria's "caring" in Life 1 and Life 2.

Maria's *punctuation* of her perceptions regarding her role as mother: "*I am first a mother then a wife*"; "...as if my children were my life"; "the best thing that ever happened to me in my life is being a mother..." is illustrative of her stability. Her care of her children is primary. This is her *stability* -the core of her behaviour informing her identity. This caring *pattern* remains stable in Life 2: "With that baby its time to change her, its time...I teach Jackie.."; "Yes, Olivia, we sit and talk a lot...".

That is, the *stability and change* in caring in Life 1 links with the *stability and change* in caring in Life 2, and vice versa. Thus using Keeney's (1983:50) compact expression, caring is:



Adopting the complementary view of *stability and change* a description with regard to the *distinction* "caring" becomes possible. Connecting the *distinctions* the change in "care of self" is viewed in relation to the constancy in "care of self". Applying the *stability/change* complementarity, Maria's *punctuation* "*be kind to myself*" changes and yet remains the same. Her caring behaviour defines her (stability). What has changed is the degree of self-care:

"I can never think about me since he dies I tell myself be kind to yourself"

Maria's caring behaviour can be said to constitute her *stability*. "*I never put myself first*". Her caring was specifically directed at Ernesto. "*I needed to pamper Ernesto*". After her son's death the behaviour characterising this caring changes. Other recipients become primary, (change) while her caring behaviour towards Ernesto continues (stability).

In developing an understanding of the change in Life 2 with respect to this aspect of Maria, the *pattern* of caring reveals the change in the specifics of the behaviour, while simultaneously reflecting the stability in the caring *pattern*. In Life 2, there is a new pattern of caring: Maria's caring is now directed at her family (including Ernesto), her self, The Compassionate Friends and the Portuguese community. This links with the caring in Life 1, as Ernesto remains a recipient of Maria's care in Life 2.

INTRODUCING METAPATTERNS

By connecting the *patterns* that have emerged in the narrative, the *pattern of patterns* of connection can be illustrated (Bateson 1979:27). Connecting the themes of "pain", "special" and "caring" an overview of the story is created:

PAIN SPECIAL CARING

Naming the relationship between the themes the term "change" seems appropriate. It is the connecting thread running through Maria's story. Thus the *metapattern* of "change" is constructed drawing on:

- change in the "special" relationship;
- change in holding on and letting go ("pain");
- change in "caring"; and
- change in Maria's maternal role and in her self.

The themes connect and overlap. Maria's "caring" behaviour in respect of Ernesto creates the "special" bond. Similarly the "special" relationship influences the "caring". "Pain (and joy) links with the "specialness" and the "caring". *Distinctions* relating to "specialness" merge with those referring to "change" and "pain":

"...that's what Ernesto tried all those years ("special") and I didn't understand("pain") ... let people see you for what you are ... and I am trying to be that person" ("change")".

The *pattern* "specialness" is linked to that of "caring", "pain" and "change". After the loss, her surviving children become more special. The "change" is the conscious appreciation of her other children and family. The intensity of feeling for Ernesto ("pain") becomes linked with the resurrection of intense feeling ("specialness") for her other children.

"I don't take anything for granted... if I'm having a nice chat with Olivia, I think, this moment is so precious.... enjoy every moment".

In addition "pain" links closely with "caring and "special":

"Two weeks later Olivia had her baby and you have to think further... let me show some love to her, let me not cry so much";

"...for the sake of the baby, for Olivia"...I never let go";

"...look I love this grandchild..." (special)

Maria's distinction regarding the special relationship, reflects the *patterns* of "joy (and "pain") and personal "change":

"It was the biggest privilege to be his mother, for the person I became being his mother." (Life 1)

Maria's being and becoming ("change") are interwoven with the themes of "special" relationship, "caring" and "pain". Connecting the *distinctions*, the *pattern* of "change" can be seen to characterise both Life 1 and Life 2.

"He tried so hard to teach me" ("change" in Life 1)

"I've lost a son, yes! but I must....make a contribution."

"I have become a very humble person since..";

"Ernesto wouldn't want me to look so". (Life 2)

Her preoccupation with Ernesto and the concerted effort to implement his values in her own life, maintains the "special" relationship while influencing the "changes" in herself and in her "caring".

Maria reports a "change" in her priorities following her son's death (pain). She draws the *distinctions*:

"...finding my authentic self";

"I am more sensitive, more empathic";

"I was more shallow, more materialistic";

"If I analyse myself now, I've become a better person."

"...and I'm trying to be that person" (special)

The reported changes fall under the themes, caring, special and pain.

The *pattern* of "caring" connects with the *pattern* of "specialness" and the *pattern* of "pain". It is posited that Maria's stability, "caring", is a *metapattern* of relating and being. This can also be referred to as her stability. The metapattern of "change" emerges in the story and presents the metaview of Maria's experiencing. Maria reflects that she had to "change" her caring towards herself to survive. In changing "self-care" she remains stable:

"Be kind to yourself"....thank goodness I realised, if I'm not going to be kind to myself I'm not going to survive".

Within a cybernetic frame of reference the *metapattern* "change" is encompassed by the complementarity "change and stability". Sensitivity to the processes of *stability and change* as the *metapattern* of the story, is engendered

LEVELS OF REALITY

The above examination generates thinking around a related complementary pattern, that of loss/gain. Parental loss theory makes reference to the complex layers of meaning in the experience of bereavement relating it to the multiplicity of losses (Rando 1991; Brice 1991). Varela and Keeney also make mention of *levels*. Varela (1976) refers to the imbrication of *levels* and Keeney (1983) to the orders of recursion that form a complementarity. An enhanced understanding of the story is achieved by incorporating bereavement theory's reference to multiple meaning with Varela's (1976:65) formulation of:

Complementarity: a reality / *levels* of reality.

In terms of this, Maria's perceived reality of loss could be seen as one of the totality of possible perceptions. This can be represented as:

loss / *levels* of loss

loss / loss of Ernesto; loss of validation; loss of identity; loss of assumptive world;

Maria draws many *distinctions* connecting loss with change and personal growth:

"Since Ernesto's death, I'm a person with much depth...I'm a better person now"

"A lot of things in me have changed"

"I appreciate more the beauty in things"

"I don't take anything for granted".

"the cemetery.... For the first time last Sunday I was so at peace there."

The implied distinction is: [*"I have gained on some levels, I have grown as a person"*].

Applying the paradigm of imbrication of *levels* to the loss/gain *pattern*, the complementarity of loss can be graphically illustrated as:

loss / *levels* of loss/*levels* of gain

This frame of reference changes the conceptualisation of opposites. The gains (personal growth) and the losses do not stand alone but are constituent parts of the "loss/gain" whole, which is represented by the *distinctions*: loss, grief or bereavement.

DISCUSSION OF THE USEFULNESS OF CYBERNETIC DESCRIPTION FOR THIS STUDY

Within this inclusive ('both-and') frame of reference, the combination of information from different sources was encouraged. In the case analysis, Maria's way of thinking merged with a cybernetic epistemology, rendering a meta view. This enrichment of information was similarly achieved by combining cybernetic description with the theory regarding the parental loss of a child.

- Complementary description was useful in illustrating the *pattern* of recursion connecting conceptual distinctions and thereby facilitating the creation of new conceptual connections and realities. Awareness of the complementarity comprising distinctions and the processes underlying it was useful in generating alternative distinctions. In consequence, the patterns and *metapatterns* in the story became easier to discern. Complete descriptions (Bateson, 1979) regarding Maria's world of experience - her ecology of ideas - were facilitated using this conceptual tool.
- Cybernetic description links the patterns that make up experience. By attending to connections, the relationship between themes in the narrative emerged. An overview of the structuring of Maria's experience was thereby generated and the meta-process of her story revealed.
- Upon examination, Maria's descriptions and habits of *punctuation* reveal a linear epistemology. Double description utilises a method of conceptualising that avoids the common constraints of language. By encompassing the polarities of Maria's distinctions, relationship and pattern were introduced and a higher order of description achieved.

- The cybernetic form of description generates a way of conceptualising that introduced a creative languaging about Maria's experience. The relationship between Maria's descriptions was the focus, not the *distinctions* in themselves. The use of the formulae for forming complementarity generated more useful descriptions thus contributing to an aesthetic understanding of the story.
- By highlighting the relationship between the *distinctions* the trap of dormitive description was avoided. Concepts were described in relation to other concepts, facilitating a holistic understanding of Maria's experiencing.
- The use of a cybernetic epistemology creates a different yet related construction of the story, one in which relationship and *patterns* can be discerned. Thus the narrative becomes representative of complimentary description.
- Operating in a frame of reference sensitive to the recursive process, an aesthetic view of the mother-son relationship became possible. As a result useful information regarding the reciprocal contributions of both mother and son emerged. Accordingly, descriptions reflecting the reciprocal nature of the mother-son relationship and other interactions in the story were evolved and different insights into the narrative fostered.
- Employing Varela's conceptualisation of the imbrication of *levels* allowed insight into the complexity comprising Maria's narrative. This conceptual tool facilitated a complementary view of process.
- The changes attending the loss were able to be described within the cybernetic *complementarity* of stability/change. Maria's experience of change was able to be conceptualised in recursive relation to the experience of constancy. The *stability/change* complementarity was further useful in illustrating how old *patterns* of relating (stability) in Life 1 feed into new *patterns* of relating (change) in Life 2 and vice versa. Thus the *metapattern* of restructuring the relationship over time was linked to the *metapattern* of constancy characterising the relationship.

RELEVANCE OF A CYBERNETIC VIEW FOR GRIEF THERAPY

- Cybernetic description is grounded in constructivism. Its core concept that other realities exist and are subjectively constructed, recognises in the grief experience that the individual experience of loss is idiosyncratic and varies widely. This frame of reference engenders a sensitivity to the unique process of the structuring of the grief experience. In consequence sensitivity to the diverse forms of grieving is generated.
- This perspective takes cognisance of the habit of punctuating one's world of experience and the influence the individual has on shaping his own experience. This introduces a particular understanding of the ways in which the bereaved come to know their experience of loss, that can have significance for the therapeutic process.
- Feedback is a core construct of this epistemology. Therefore cognisance of the context for behaviour and the recursive processes involved are primary. Therapeutic understanding is enriched by linking individual experiencing and behaviour with its context. Personal stories of bereavement become informed by the particular context of loss and mourning. The therapist is then better able to affirm "the systemic complexity of the other" (Bateson, 1987:176).
- The facilitation of the expression of the loss is a primary goal in grief therapy (Klass, 1988; Rando, 1991). A partial view is often presented in grief therapy. Awareness of the possibility of discrepancies between the experiencing and the descriptions of grief, generates insight and allows the problem to be addressed. Alternative forms of expression can then be encouraged by the therapist, such as metaphor, poetry and letter writing. These transcend the limitations of common language (Bateson, 1987).
- The cybernetic view while remaining empathic towards the bereaved's experience, fosters new possibilities for understanding. Keeney (1983:48) reminds us that we are free to draw other distinctions. This empowers therapeutic understanding – it extends the common store of conceptual tools - and enables both the bereaved and the therapist to conceptualise the grief experience in a more encompassing way.

- Cybernetic description is a holistic paradigm. A style of thinking is generated that takes cognisance of complementarities. The synthesis of information produces diverse views. It accordingly avoids and transcends the limitations of other epistemologies.
- Traditionally either/or distinctions limit what is known. It is documented that the bereaved are often torn between moving on and wanting to stay closely linked with the deceased - staying in the past versus moving into the future (Rando 1991, Parkes, 1972, Klass 1988). Grief work addresses the struggle of this developmental transition while never prescribing its course. The conceptualisation of the grief experience often tends to focus exclusively on the change aspects of this experience. Cybernetics offers a frame of reference better able to encompass and comprehend the experience of grieving. Complementarity by embracing dualities - past and future; life and death - provides a potentially useful conceptual tool in grief therapy. It facilitates a holistic understanding of the processes characterising grief.
- The stability/change complementarity facilitates an understanding of the underlying relationship between change and stability and the constancy of relationships for people who suffer the often radical changes of bereavement. Within this paradigm bereavement can be conceived of as both a coming to terms with loss and a coming to terms with life. The stability/change frame of reference enables an alternative conceptualisation of the pre-loss and post-loss patterns.
- The cybernetic paradigm has relevance for grief therapy in that it facilitates both a sensitivity to *pattern* and the construction of alternative descriptions of *pattern*. By generating descriptions of *metapattern* an aesthetic view is created. This provides valuable material for therapeutic understanding and intervention.
- In the main, grief theory posits recovery as a return to a pre-loss state. Grief therapy can be constrained by this hierarchical view. It is contended that therapy in this field has much to gain from an aesthetic conceptualisation of the grief process. Further benefits accrue by merging this view with existing bereavement theory.
- Cybernetic complementarity collapses time thereby facilitating an aesthetic view.

- The "both-and" premise is an inclusive view. It functions to inculcate respect for the frame of reference of the bereaved in addition to encouraging the introduction of another view. This sensitivity ensures a solid base for therapeutic purpose and the merging or extension of perspectives.

RECOMMENDATION

- The purpose of this single case study has been the limited exploration of the usefulness of cybernetic description for grief therapy. It is suggested that further studies include the parental subsystem and a larger sample for the purpose of generating richer data.
- Second order cybernetics has not fallen within the ambit of this study. It is recommended that the inclusion of a second-order view would generate useful information.

CONCLUSION

Cybernetic description is concerned with how our communications fit our world of experience. It is by languaging that the act of knowing, in the behavioural co-ordination which is language, brings forth a world (Maturana & Varela 1987). The work of grieving is the storying around the loss. The storying of loss turns on description informed by conceptualisation. The language of this paradigm encompasses dualisms and is better able to synthesise seeming paradoxical concepts. Descriptions of grief are able to be represented in an holistic way. This has value for the therapeutic process in its entirety.

This study promotes the usefulness of cybernetic description in the field of grief.

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ADDENDUM 1

EXTRACTS OF TRANSCRIBED AUDIOTAPE INTERVIEWS:

Just tell me your.. start from the beginning take me back¹

"O.K. He was supposed.. He lived in Johannesburg and he had agreed that we would come on Saturday for breakfast.... It was my youngest daughter's 21st...how special he was, since the day he was born. He was my first born, my first son. He was so special, so special. I, I...once I held this little bundle in my hands: "I am the luckiest woman in the world". I was married for nine months and ten days before my son was born. I can't imagine life without him....He was always the top student, he had study scrolls at school....he got provincial colours for chess, he was a brilliant chess player....he was not just my son but my friend and my teacher. My English wasn't so good when he was small, so he'd walk around with a dictionary and correct me. He tried so hard to teach me my accent, but my accent is something I cannot change....From a very young age he would teach me, correct my English and that, we had such a bond."

It sounds like you had a special world together or....

"Yes, when he was at Wits he would come home every weekend bring dirty washing....we bought him a small fridge for the room.... I never wanted my son to go hungry. I have this, this obsession I want to feed people....He'd come and tell me how was this how was that. We had - and I think my husband resented that - I always used to think "I'm first a mother and then a wife". When I was with my husband, I'd make him feel number one....but I knew within me, "I'm first a mother and then....""

And it sounds that you were first most special with your son?

"I've never had that special bond with a another human being. I've got four children but I've never had it with another human being where I had it. And, and he always made me feel I was so special, and I made him feel he was special. And every Friday I'd go to his home.

¹The bold text represents my questions and statements.

He loved fresh flowers in his place. I would go with the maid from Boksburg to Johannesburg, clean his placetend to the dirty washing, put fresh flowers and leave him a meal cooked. And he would walk in with his briefcase, drop it down and pick up the 'phone and say "Mom thanks, you are a star! Thanks for the flowers, thanks for the food. It's so good to come home and find everything smelling so nice. I'll see you tomorrow"....He always came home on the weekends....He would say "People like my mother are so hard to find". Now after he died....that pain I felt, such a pain. Nobody could comfort me. Nobody could take that pain away....And because I'd worked at Hospice I knew "Don't take tranquillisers....face reality."....My husband identified the body, but then there had to be a post-mortem because he didn't die of natural causes....I said to my husband "I must see him....don't nobody must stop me"....My good friends went with me...."

It sounds as if you had a lot of support....

"Because I'm very involved with the church, I've always done it, now people thought it's their turn to do it for me. I'm a very proud person....I don't like people to do things for me. I like to do it for them. Anyway I have become a very humble person since."

Just talk a bit about that.

"....and my son would say "Why do you wear those rings?" and I would say "Because I was deprived as a child. I come from such a poor family. Let me enjoy this." And he would say, "But Ma, less is more." When he was alive he used to say he cannot handle jewellery. He used to say "Less is more." He had to die for me to realize that....when he was alive I didn't and now I bother and he's not here to see....and I'm sorry I never appreciated...."

And did he explain that, less is more?

"He was a person of simple needs. He was a very refined, refined person....He spoke so wise, I could just sit and listen to him. So if there was something going on in politics, he would sit and say "Ma this is happening because of that and that and if you read this and that you will understand." He was such a good teacher. I had a very good knowledge of what was going on, because of him. I miss that so much. I wish he was here to explain all that is going on. Yesterday when I saw President Mandela coming to the field I just sat

there and cried....if Ernesto had been alive he would have been glued to the television and watching. I, I can't tell you as the time goes by I am feeling better, yes, but I miss him so much. I long so to see his faceUm, like I was saying, I stopped putting nailpolish, I stopped caring for my hands, I wouldn't even put a wedding band and then I thought "I've been married thirty three years, I must put a band on."

It sounds like you saw the world differently?

"I did and another thing, now getting back to jewellery, I think it's for superficial people. I am not superficial now. I don't have to show beautiful rings to show people who I am, people must see who I am. That's what Ernesto tried all the years and I didn't understand "Let people see you for what you are not for what you can wear or buy. But you as a person. and I am trying to be that person."

That's struck a deep chord in you, that message.

"And my friend says to me, "The day you wear your rings I know you are your old self". And I say to her "I will never be my old self. I cannot be the same person." I have changed....once somebody loses a child....And you know, before Ernesto died I used to think "I have done O.K."I used to think "I'm so lucky I'm so blessed."

You were content.

"I was so content. I was so happy. I was doing so much charity work because I believed in this "I can't take, take. I must give back." I remembered the week he died thinking that. And now after Ernesto died, Olivia said "We've always known that he was most special to you." So now with all of this I also have a lot of guilt feelings. Not towards Ernesto. Guilty that it was obvious to them that he was my favourite....and funnily enough my favourite was my eldest. I know you're not meant to have favourites, but....you have no idea the sacrifices I did for them, I never put myself first. My children, my husband, first. I'm many things, a selfish person I'm not....Once Ernesto died, I went to The Compassionate Friends. Jean would say "Be kind to yourself". I could not be kind to myself. Thank goodness I realised if I'm not going to be kind to myself, I'm not going to survive....I'm further down the road now."

And how do you mark that being further on in your grief?

"I don't cry so much now....They say you go through stages. I don't know if I'll ever be at the stage of accepting his death. I don't, somehow I don't think I'll ever accept that. But I accept that he is dead. I've stopped bargaining with God, I've stopped, there was this terrible anger and this "unfair, unfair." I've stopped that. Now I know he's dead. Nothing on this world can bring him back....My husband's sister suggested that I must pretend that Ernesto didn't exist, pretend that I have three children. I don't want to forget the best part of my life. He was so special. That was the best part....if any thing I want to know....I was privileged to have been his mother, it was the biggest thing that happened in my life. I don't want to forget that. She was meaning to be helpful, but so ignorant....I can never, I cannot go to her house."

Last time you spoke about Ernesto's death, the funeral and your feelings at the time... I'm wondering what supported you through this time?

"I just wanted to die. Two weeks later, Olivia had her baby, and you have to think further...."Let me show some love to her, let me not cry so much." So after he dies the one that I spoke at all about things was Olivia."

But you took strength from Olivia really in that time?

"Yes Olivia, she....we used to sit and talk a lot...."

And the fact that she was about to give birth, somehow did it feel as if that was something you could look forward....?

"She would say "Ma you're going to be a Granny. Look at that, it's another life coming into....and it will also be another dos Santos". She was unmarried....and when the baby, when she went into labour I went with her and while I was there, I just.... Ernesto used to say to her, "I know it's not natural for a brother to be there. If you want me to be there you must just say.""

So there was a lot of sadness around that birth?

"Oh a lot of sadness. I remember sitting in there and crying, crying, crying. And we would say imagine if Ernesto was there. He would be pacing up and down...."

That birth, so soon after Ernesto's death. What feelings did that throw up?

"Let me tell you, when I heard that Ernesto....the policeman told me, the second thought was 'phone my husband, the third was 'phone my friend to tell her (Olivia) in the best possible way, don't shock her. Rather....when she comes here I don't shock her. For the sake of the baby I must compose myself. Because she was pregnant, I never let go. I never went beserk....just tears, tears. I never knew the human body had so much tears."

I'm sensing that you really were thinking about that new life very much, even at that time....

"And at the funeral....I've always been able to compose myself no matter what.... So at the funeral I used to think "I cannot, scream and shout, I must, must compose myself for the sake of my husband, for my other children and above all for Ernesto. If he could see me, if somehow he can see this he must not feel embarrassed....There is his boss." Like that's what he always told them: "My mother's great with the work she does for the Hospice."....People often talk about this and that. I always end up talking about my children....as if my children were my life. Sometimes I say I have a good marriage....The best thing that ever happened to me in my life is being a mother....without a shadow of a doubt."

So when Ernesto died your sense of being a caretaker and a mother really took a knock.

"A terrible, terrible, terrible knock. I cannot tell you...."

What's happened to that now?

"I've definitely become a humble person. Um...I, as if someone took from me my most precious gift....the thing that was most precious. I admired his character very strongly. He set very high standards for himself....We had different outlooks in life. He said: "Enjoy life. Do whatever makes you happy....Don't worry so much about others, worry a little about yourself. Be a little bit selfish." I am many things, I can never think about me. And funny enough, since he dies I used to tell myself "Be kind to yourself."....I must tell you, I go every Sunday to the cemetery. I bring lovely flowers every week. I bring a bucket and a lappie to wash the stone, cold water for the flowers to stay fresh longer. And I always buy flowers that he liked....and I talk as if he's listening...."I must give you fresh flowers every week because I always gave it to you when you were alive." For the first time last Sunday I was so at peace there....

Something is changing?

"I used to feel such a sadness. I used to say "This is so unfair, so unfair".....After we went to identify the body my husband's blood pressure shot sky-high."

So does that mean that you had to worry about him as well?

"I didn't care about him. I couldn't. I was in too much pain to worry about him or the other children. The pain was so great, so great....I was so raw.... You're so raw - terrible pain. But now I see myself as: "I'm healing, I'm no longer ten steps back." The fact that I felt peace at the cemetery...."

Tell me something about your support structure....

"I realised....the support I had from my friends and the community of Boksburg. They carried me through, because I couldn't carry myself. That love....I cannot tell you. That was what kept me going. When I think back, the things that people did. All my life I've given love - and I'm a proud person, I rather give than receive. Well did I receive love!"

What was one thing that helped?

"First I went to Compassionate Friends, a month later. I thought "I can't go". The pain was so bad, so bad. "So, let me go." It was killing me. "If only this pain can be a little bit better." When I went I was so raw, got so pain....And when I think back, that was one thing that helped, to talk about him."

So was that what you were doing, talking about Ernesto?

"Like this weekend, his best friend came. He was trying to avoid talking about Ernesto and I wanted to talk about him. As he was leaving he said "I brought photo's but I don't know if..." Like he was trying to protect me. And I said "Oh no, there's no time like the present...." And it was good.... and you know these people mean well...."

Have you always been someone who doesn't hide away from things?

"A lot of things in me have changed....I appreciate more the beauty in things. I used to be tense and Ernesto used to say "Ma, relax! Take time off to smell the roses." And and now when I see roses I want to go and smell roses.... So many things I didn't appreciate before. I wish he could have seen that change. Still, if I go to a supermarket and see a man and a son shopping, I couldn't handle it. I would think, "He is so lucky!""

But for me, it symbolises for me how you took care of him and now that's gone. That you would like that to continue.

"You must know what I used to do. I still used to buy his shaving stuff. So whenever I go to the supermarket....and passing the aftershaves....'cause I no longer can buy. He always loved a good aftershave. Oh! I get so upset when I see these and....I always used to care those things for him. He was a thirty years old and you must think "god!", but I...."

He was lucky.

"I'm so glad I did those things."

That you could be a mother to him still...

"You see usually by then they're married. They've got their own family. Funnily enough a few weeks before he died, I came with a friend to Johannesburg (Ernesto's home). We dropped the maid, I left her there and we went shopping. We came back with the fresh flowers for the vase and the cold meats....then the dirty washing coming home. And she says "You do too much. Stop it! That's why he won't get a wife because you spoil him." I don't know, as if something inside me that I've known and I needed to do things for him, this terrible need."

And him more than any of the others?

"Funnily enough, not that I neglected the others. I didn't. But I made more of a fuss of Ernesto....With Jo, he liked to pamper me and I liked to pamper Ernesto. So that type of difference."

I'm wondering what other things have changed? You said a lot about you has changed.

"I tell you for example, we always had people on the weekends always....I would make exotic things. I don't invite them any more. I cannot deal with those things anymore. I cannot be bothered."

What are the feelings around that?

"I feel so bad. I don't have the energy to set the tables. It's so pointless and I don't like crowds....That joy that I used to feel, I no longer feel that bubbling joy....I really, it's such an effort. I'm not at peace. I'm restless. And you see that's why I put on 20 kilos."

And that's different....?

"I must say that the last few months it's getting better. I can sit still longer. I don't take anything for granted. Say, for example if I'm having a nice chat with Olivia, I think "This moment is so precious, I must engrave this on my memory." If Jo 'phones and I listen, I

want to listen to every word, because you never know if he is going to 'phone again....Not that I don't know if I ever took Ernesto for granted. But you can't take your family, your loved one's for granted. So enjoy every moment."

Do you feel life is fragile? That some harm might come to....?

"Definitely....and yet I try and think "The worst thing that can happen to a human being has happened to me. Nothing, nothing in life can be as bad. So from now on you can go on being positive." Some people see everything negative....I always look for something positive. So if I think "Ernesto died. One of the other children or my grandchild might...." So for my sanity I have to say, "The worst thing has happened. From now on things can never be as bad"....I don't want to sound as if I'm bragging but so often if there is a crisis in the community, because I run the prayer group, the 'phone would go. "So-and so is having an operation." We have a prayer chain, Portuguese and English....and so often my prayers were answered. And now I haven't got that faith. I don't pray like I used to and that saddens me. That has changed."

So something about the meaning around belief has changed?

"After Ernesto died, I wouldn't put make-up on, no lipstick nothing. Now It's starting again. And I knew the day I put lipstick on I would be healing, because I knew Ernesto wouldn't want me to look so."

But it took a long time.

"It took eighteen months."

What other changes have there been?

"I would say I was more materialistic, more shallow. Since Ernesto's death I'm a person with much depth. If I analyse myself now, I'm a better person now. I have become a more patient. I'm more understanding. I'm more tolerant."

And material possessions mean less?

"Oh, it means absolutely nothing.. my status doesn't mean much now. I always before used to see myself as a prominent person, now that's not so.."

It's not so important.

"Oo, that's not at all important. I'm more compassionate. Yes.

I used to sit there after Ernesto died, sitting there like, like in a dwaal. And I remember a friend coming in and saying to me "Oh! you are so strong that's why this happened to you. I said "Yes, I am like an oak, so strong! I was so mad with her....People talk about Olivia. You know until you're in this situation (illegitimate grandchild)..look I love this grandchild, but you can't be proud. But, because I've lost one child, I in return have changed. I am not the person I was. I don't take things for granted....Ernesto was still alive and the day that she told me she was pregnant I phoned him. And he said,"It's not nice that she is but you can't kick her out. If you want I will support her." But none of us is perfect....When I first came I felt such a terrible weight, as if the whole world is sitting and I was going down, down....and I thought I can't carry the weight much longer. Now I feel that weight has shifted....I'm feeling a little bit better. Things feel a little bit better. I don't know if I will ever accept Ernesto's death....but now I cope with it better. Since Ernesto's death one thing has changed and it is this, I am being kind to myself. If someone asks me: "Do this do that, come to the wedding" and I feel I can't cope emotionally I just: "I'm sorry I can't do this." Before....just to keep people happy. Now I don't want to do that. If people don't like it..."

It's something about being more honest, respecting your own truth?

"I'm being more my authentic self."

Maybe it was less easier to find your authentic self before Ernesto's death?

"Yes, you're always considering everybody else's feelings except your own. I find it very hard to go to weddings. It's because I go to weddings and I think: "He'll never be the groom. He'll never stand up and say that speech. He will never give me grandchildren...."

It's such a milestone and for continuity....

"Yes, now if somebody invites us, I say "No." We had the second anniversary of his death last week. It was mixed emotion. The time is passing....I, before I could hear him laughing all the time. I could hear it in my ears. Now it is fading away. I don't know if that's good or bad. I look at the photos and I think Oh.... Sometimes it feels as if it was yesterday. Some days it feels it was so long ago."

And it's so hard to keep him close with this passage of time.

"And people mean well but they try to avoid talking about him. They don't realise that I need to talk about him."

It's hard for you to tell them that?

"I went to an another funeral. There I saw Ernesto's best friend and he was avoiding me....I walked over to him: "It's so good to see you" I said "Do me a favour, don't avoid me. It's you who can't cope not me." And I said to him: "Once it's warmer I shall make a braai for all Ernesto's friends and we're going to sit and talk about him." From small I always encouraged my children to bring friends home. They all grew up together."

I'm thinking back to when you saw him. What are you saying to him?

""I'm still Ernesto's mother and he is still my son and I still want to be friends with you." I was trying to tell him that. That I find people don't want to make you sad. What makes me sad is when people don't talk about him as if he didn't exist. Because I love him because he was part of my life, I want to talk about him."

So has that always been you way to confront what doesn't fit with you?

"Before I was much more abrupt now I'm more gentle, more kind. I say the same thing in a different way. I'm more diplomatic."

As if you're more tolerant...

"I am, because through Ernesto's death people showed me so much love and so much kindness. I don't think I would have survived if it wasn't for the love of the community and the friends and that carried me. And therefore it's my turn. This friend that died, her daughter, she was the one who organised that I go to Compassionate Friends. I organised her father's funeral. I said "Please don't thank me, I am only giving back." It also made me realise that I am shifting. Not to say that I don't feel pain, it's still very much there. But I can cope....Anna, the washing comes and goes. If the washing is the reason to come home every weekend, that's O.K. with me."

But I'm really getting a picture of a big family. You include everyone.

"Oh, I do. "

So even though your children are grown the home base is still very much...

"Oh yes, there's Anna's room and Olivia's and Jo's, empty. Before that Ernesto finished matric, he went to 'varsity and he stayed in res and he used to come home on weekends. His room was always there. So when he finished studying he went to the army....After his six weeks when he could come home....and I would go and fetch him....or I would go to Sunday Mass there to see him....then I would have the army washing coming home. I've always had the washing coming home....The army - he could come home every weekend.... so I got used to slowly him being away and coming on weekends. So when he moved to Johannesburg to a flat, he still used to come home to Boksburg....I don't want these memories to fade. I don't know if it's a good thing or bad. Maybe I want to hold on, maybe I'm trying to punish myself. Like his laugh is fading."

And you're thinking maybe the pain at least feels like a connection?

"If you feel this terrible pain, it's O.K. you....I don't know...."

You're still connected?

"When I laugh, that happy laugh, like Ha!Ha! then I feel guilty."

Guilty that you are able to be happy? I'm wondering if you can be happy and sad at the same time?

" Like when I went on this diet. You will ask yourself what has that got to do with Ernesto's death. He wouldn't want me to be fat. He was very proud of me. He wouldn't want me to become a slob that I was becoming. After he died I picked up so much weight. Every day I was eating pasta and while I was eating I used to have such a comfort. That terrible, terrible pain that I was carrying it was....I wasn't feeling the pain. So I eat more pasta....keep the pain away. And then I realized "Gosh! Ernesto wouldn't want me to be like this. He would be so embarrassed." I feel better about myself."

And that's always been important to you, what Ernesto thought?

"Extremely, extremely. He always wanted me to be a lady, never be vulgar. And I was conscious of that all the time."

And you keep him in your mind. How he would like you to be?

"You can also ask yourself what has it got, diet to do with him dying? It has also proven me one thing. I'm back more or less on the track of being where I was. I've lost a son, yes! but I must carry on living. Because he died, I musn't just sit waiting for my time to die to arrive. I must make a contribution."

In a way that time when you were eating pasta, you needed to do that. You couldn't do anything else.

"While I was so, so sore, so unhappy there is no way I could've dieted. I didn't care. I didn't have the will. Quite frankly, I couldn't care if I died. Quite frankly, the thought of me lying there next to him, was very comforting. I remember after he died, there was a young man, same car as his, and my god, for a few minutes I thought that's Ernesto. And often in the

crowds, I used to look for him....and you must think I'm crazy. I can not go and buy groceries, I want to.... Ernesto only used blades and I want to reach out and get them....By talking my pain is shifting. I cannot emphasise how important it is."

How do you understand that? When we're talking, what are we doing, what's happening?

"I'm reliving the experience....It did exist....By saying that, I'm confirming: "We did have that kind of relationship, that kind of family." At the same time I'm realising it's no longer there....I had that, but I no longer have."

You're connecting the two - getting the link - and that relationship that was there before the death?

"And I find as the months have gone by, I don't know if I'm doing this consciously or not, the very special moments we had. It is so, so important. The Xmas before he died. I can relive all that. The special occasions, weddings....How I relive all that. I try to keep that very much alive in my mind."

How do you feel now about your family?

"I feel now as if we were a chain but now link is gone. It's no longer complete. Often people say "Oh your grandchild came at the right time to take Ernesto's place." No! no human being can take Ernesto's place. The baby came at the right time....That the baby was a joy, yes!....that she was a substitute, no! And I feel this very strongly."

Was she a bit of a distraction from the pain?

"Yes, If the baby hadn't been there I could sit and be miserable. With that baby, it's time to change her, it's time.... At the nursing home, I cried: "I'm glad that I got a grandchild, I'm so sad that Ernesto never lived to be an uncle." So, I always have mixed emotions. It's never, if I'm very, very sad I must have something of joy coming in. But if I'm full of joy I must have sad coming in.... I teach Jackie about her uncle. I want her to know about him."

You're talking about continuity?

"I've made a photo collage of us all. Because...in my heart -does he still live in my heart? - he was such an important part of my life. But I don't want to people to say that he didn't exist. Often sometimes, I fool myself. I think that he is in Johannesburg and I feel so heartsore. Last...I couldn't go up to his room. It was too painful. I should have been more "He's dead, he's gone." I want him here, I don't want...It was the biggest privilege to be his mother, for the person I became being his mother. It was a painful, terrible thing when he died. I try to live all the joy, all the love of all the years back."

When you say you're fooling yourself, could it be that you're interacting with him in the old way and now you're having to change some of that?

"Often when the 'phone rings lunchtime I used to think: "It's Ernesto." Then I stopped. Last week the 'phone rang and I thought again: "It's Ernesto."....Like Sunday, I went and I was having a chat with him there. I know it's just his remains there, but if your spirit is there...."