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Dialectical tensions: Drunk driving-related loss among emerging adult siblings

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DIALECTICAL TENSIONS: DRUNK DRIVING-RELATED LOSS AMONG
EMERGING ADULT SIBLINGS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Krista Nilsen

May 2011

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

DIALECTICAL TENSIONS: DRUNK DRIVING-RELATED LOSS AMONG
EMERGING ADULT SIBLINGS

by

Krista Nilsen

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

DIALECTICAL TENSIONS: DRUNK DRIVING-RELATED LOSS AMONG EMERGING ADULT SIBLINGS

By Krista Nilsen

The longest relationship many of us will share in our lifetime is that with our siblings. Siblings sometimes experience the loss of their brothers and sisters to drunk drivers. Despite the risks associated with drinking and driving, this behavior continues to occur. This study explores drunk driving, sibling loss, and loss during emerging adulthood. This study explores the ways in which dialectical tensions and liminality take shape across educational and professional contexts when emergent adults lose her/his siblings to drunk drivers.

Two dialectical tensions emerged in this work: openness-closedness and connectedness-autonomy. Surviving siblings engage in four patterns of praxis in negotiating loss-related dialectical tensions: disorientation, segmentation, balance, and sharing. Negotiation of these dialectical tensions helps surviving siblings navigate through liminal spaces after a significant loss. Often times, the other party in the communicative act mediates the communication and dialectical tensions surrounding loss. The findings herein suggest that academic and professional institutions as well as instructors and supervisors should engage in grief communication training. In addition, surviving siblings should seek out a space of comfort where they may disclose and discuss their experiences of loss and grief.

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study. On several occasions, you helped me exemplify my theoretical questions pertaining to dialectical theory and liminality, and how the two relate to one another. It is this patience and guidance that allowed me to more thoroughly understand and apply theory in this study. Dr. Todd, I enjoyed your candid response and questions about this work on a societal level. You helped me grow in this work and moved me toward the balance between personal and theoretical that this thesis holds today.

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge my father and sister. Kari and Dad, this work is for you. I miss you everyday. While I will never fully accept or come to terms with your death, this work has helped me work through and better understand what happened.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I am a sister. I am a daughter. I am an only child. I am a surviving sibling and a surviving daughter. Tensions pull me between these different, contradicting identities. Each is a different response, depending on the question and who is asking.

When I was a 20-year-old college student, a drunk driver killed my 15-year old sister and my father. My mother survived the accident. I was away in college at the time.

In the United States, a drunk driver kills someone every 40 minutes (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2007). In 2001, more than 2 million college students engaged in drinking and driving (Hingson, 2005). Despite the risks associated with drinking and driving, this behavior continues; an unfortunate aftermath of this decision is the lives and relationships left permanently altered.

I will explore dialectical tensions among emerging adult siblings who have suffered the loss of a brother or sister to a drunk driver. Dialectical tensions are those contradictions we experience on a daily basis, often simultaneously, as we feel ourselves pulled between contradictory experiences, emotion, and understanding. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) state, there is no “finite set of contradictions in personal relationships to be discovered ... infinite possibilities for oppositions exist, depending upon the historically salient topics of conversation” (p. 44). It is possible the dialectical tensions that exist for the parents of deceased children or the wives of husbands living with dementia may vary considerably from the dialectical tensions that exist for college-aged surviving siblings who have suffered their loss to a drunk driver, or they may be

similar. For example, the desire for independence to grieve, yet the need to be with loved ones, may be a tension surviving siblings experience (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). In addition, surviving siblings find themselves in spaces of liminality – betwixt and between. According to Kelly (2008), liminal “spaces are between cultural states, making them an in-between place, a non-place...to be in liminality is to be in limbo, on the threshold of between here and there” (336). Siblings must grow out of their old identities, when their siblings were still alive, and embrace an evolving/in-flux identity characterized by dialectical tensions that emerge in communication and through which they must navigate. It is noteworthy that liminal spaces are not necessarily negative. While siblings experience discomfort, this space of liminality also offers possibility. Dialectical tensions guide this study; however, I find that liminality compliments dialectical theory, and allows a glimpse into the role of self and identity in this work.

I am interested in exploring how dialectical tensions and liminality take shape across educational and professional contexts when an emergent adult loses his or her sibling(s) to a drunk driver. I am a surviving sibling, and I will share my own experience with dialectical tensions and loss in an educational environment. My experience is of value, as it is through the lens of autoethnography that I investigate, interpret, and make meaning of this work. From my experience of loss, I will move into the loss of other surviving siblings whose experiences share similarities, yet also exercise a uniqueness characterized by the nature of grief and loss.

The Forgotten Bereaved

“Often conscripted to the shadows in our time of sorrow, surviving siblings rarely feel they have the right to grieve beyond a few weeks. In a society that doesn’t always encourage healthy mourning in general, we are indeed the forgotten bereaved” (Wray, 2003, p. 22).

I begin here because I often do not feel free to grieve, to communicate my loss on a societal, academic, professional or interpersonal level. Ten years ago, my sister Kari died at the age of fifteen on I-5, a California State Highway just north of Stockton. My father also died that day. My mother survived. I was away at school in Santa Barbara when I received the phone call. I moved home the next day. As a surviving sibling, I experience dialectical tensions surrounding the violent and sudden loss of my sister to a drunk driver. Parker Palmer (2004) states that violence takes place when we compromise the “identity and integrity of another person” (p. 169). The loss of Kari and my father directly violated my own integrity and identity, as well as that of countless others, leaving me in flux within a web of dialectical tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, and Currier (2008) suggest a profound grieving difference between natural and violent loss. They believe that meaning making must occur when negotiating a significant loss, and that meaning is much more difficult to find when the loss is violent and unexpected. This distinction between natural and violent loss is important – loss associated with drunk driving is most definitely violent.

In addition, the distinction of loss among emergent adults is necessary in this work. Emergent adulthood are young adults between their late teens through their twenties. According to Arnett (2000), “emerging adulthood is a distinct period

demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations” (p. 469). In addition, emergent adulthood “exists only in cultures that allow young people a prolonged period of independent role exploration during late teens and twenties” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). The nature of emerging adulthood is liminal; beyond adolescence, but shy of adulthood, emerging adults are renegotiating their identities and defining themselves within their culture. Generally speaking, college students who enter academia immediately following high school fit Arnett’s (2000) definition of emergent adults. As an emerging adult, I experienced many dialectical tensions. At the time, I did not have language to articulate this experience. However, today, I will attempt to draw out and reflect on the dialectical tensions that guided my experience of grief in academia.

I was 20 years old, an emergent adult and college student, when Kari and my father died. My role in this world shifted from that of a sister and part of a four-person nuclear family to that of an only child in a single-parent household. Disoriented and without direction, I returned to school the semester following the loss of my sister and my father. I felt lost and confused during much of that time; I became forgetful and unable to uphold my commitments. I felt pulled between grief and sorrow, and the desire to move on, to overcome, and to forget. At a loss for “healthy mourning,” I allowed myself to blend into the shadows, to remain invisible and silent, to become a member of the “forgotten bereaved” (Wray, 2002, p. 22).

I regularly find myself between tensions and unsure of my direction. This space between tensions – multiple, opposing contradictions – is contextual. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) articulate a common tension, openness and closedness (p. 132). For

example, my desire to remain closed, to protect my privacy, often outweighs my desire to be open about my loss. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) believe that “openness and closedness function in ongoing interplay with one another” and our “self boundary is closed and open depending on the...perception of the various costs and benefits associated with candor and discretion” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 139). I must protect myself. This is the function of my self boundary, to protect me “from the vulnerability and risk inherent in disclosure” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 140). Openness and closedness work together and may yield positive or negative change, depending on the way I negotiate this tension. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explain the openness/closedness tension as an “active negotiation of self-disclosure and informational closedness” (p. 141). Just as “openness cannot be understood without consideration of its simultaneous interplay with closedness,” this same concept applies to other tensions surviving siblings experience (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 151). As a surviving sibling, I encounter this tension between openness and closedness. We may understand each tension a surviving sibling experiences in relation to other multiple, opposing tension(s).

In this chapter, I provide an autoethnographic account further detailing loss and dialectical tensions as an emergent adult surviving sibling. In addition, I discuss liminality throughout, which is a quality of dialectical tensions. I attempt to describe my experience of tensions, including: openness-closedness, certainty-uncertainty, visibility-invisibility, silence-voice, sibling-only child, identity-identityless, belongingness-othered, and desire for solitude-desire for friends. These tensions are multivocal and complex;

they emerge from many contradictions. While these tensions are not all inclusive, they represent a small sample of the contradictions I experienced. These tensions evolved in relation to interviews I conducted with surviving siblings; in particular, two dialectical tensions emerged in this work: openness-closedness and connectedness-autonomy. I will discuss these in further detail later in Chapter 4. Not only does a qualitative approach allow a researcher to “define categories during the process of research” (McCracken, 1988, p. 16), but in conversation with participants, it is possible that we may “change ... [our] descriptions of, and meanings about, a theme ... and suddenly see relations that ... [we] were not ... aware of earlier” (Kvale, 2007, p. 13). In this work, I am beginning to experience my loss differently, which is likely a result of *process* – the process and renegotiation of loss and liminality in dialectical tensions. As I expected, different tensions unfolded throughout the progress of this study.

Tension

Mid-September 2004. “What about you, Krista?”

All eyes around the table turn to look toward me. I feel small, uncertain of how to answer my peers. I have anticipated this, dreading the moment my peers look to me for my contribution to the conversation.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

I fidget and laugh nervously, “Oh, that’s a long, complicated story. I’ll tell it another time.”

Everyone looks uncomfortable, and I am certain I have answered incorrectly. I feel the tension around me, pulling me in opposing and contradictory directions as I

negotiate my liminal identity. The conversation turns toward the next person, and the group has moved on without me.

To disclose, or not to disclose. I sit silently in frustration. Each time – even after all this time – I feel myself simultaneously pulled between my desire to disclose, to tell everything, and my need for privacy. As a surviving sibling, the most challenging question I receive is: Do you have any siblings? I answer this question differently each time, depending on the context, and on the tensions holding the moment.

Monday, September 17, 2001. Immediately after the loss of Kari, I return to school. This juxtaposition in my life – living with the loss of my sister and attending school – challenges my identity. Am I a student, or a sister? I sit in class each day thinking of my role. And of the loss. I attempt to answer questions as to my place in society.

I am struck by the dialectical tensions that surround me. One moment, I feel all too visible; I am terrified that all eyes are on me. I feel as if strangers are staring at me and can see right through to my pain; it feels like a violation. Then I feel incredibly invisible, as if the world does not care about the void left by my sister, Kari. Back and forth, I move between these tensions.

I tell my sociology professor that I will not be in class on Wednesday. I do not tell her why. I ask her if that will be a problem. I tell myself that if she asks me why I am missing class, then I will disclose the reason. If she does not ask, then I will not disclose.

She does not ask why. She tells me it is fine I won't be in class, and then she thanks me for letting her know. I am almost disappointed. I feel as if the world can see my lost siblinghood painted across my forehead. Yet while I am disappointed, I am also relieved, as now I know that I am doing a better job than I thought in hiding my grief.

I thank her for understanding. I let her know I will see her the following Monday.

Wednesday, September 19, 2001. I am driving on I-5; my mom is in the passenger seat. I always drive – I can't handle anyone else behind the wheel. I think my mom feels the same way, preferring I drive.

We are south of Stockton. Today has finally come. We have received over six notices to appear in court over the past year-and-a-half; each time it has been put off for various reasons. Due to the time that has passed, a lack of witnesses willing to appear in court, and the defendant realizing he has no chance of winning his case in court, he agrees to a plea bargain. Maybe this is better; I don't know if I can handle sitting in a courtroom and watching the accident play out over and over again.

The judge has allowed both sides to make statements. My speech is in my purse. I've rehearsed. I've revised. I've rehearsed again. I am cold. Angry. Ready to face him, in a confrontational yet calm manner. Ready to address the court, with every word directed at him. He has a three-year-old daughter. My heart softens. Then I remember he also has an 11-year-old son whose name he cannot remember. My heart hardens. I move between my emotions of sadness and hate, in a liminal space of sister/only child.

While I was unable to find the courage to speak at Kari's and my father's funeral, *not* speaking at today's sentencing is not an option. This time, silence is out of the

question. I have a duty to speak on behalf of a group of people whose lives have been permanently altered by poor decision-making.

We arrive.

Our case is first. There are cases following ours; as a result, there are people in the courtroom I do not recognize. An African American woman sits toward the front of the courtroom, her long braided hair hanging down her back. She is pretty. We make eye contact. I wonder who she is. Is she here for another case? Is she a friend of his, here to support him? Why is she here? I begin to look around me. There are many people I do not know. I suddenly feel all too visible, a little afraid – who are these people? How can I speak in front of these people? I want to know why they are here. But there are no answers for me here today. Only a sentencing.

There are also many faces I recognize. Sherry, the wife of my father's business partner, Thomas, is here. Thomas could not bring himself to attend, as he did not know what he would do if he was forced to appear in court. Too many emotions and far too much anger. Our family friend, Theresa, is here with her daughters, Ellie and Katy, Kari's and my close friends. John, their father, is not here. He also felt he could not be held responsible for his emotions if asked to face the defendant.

The judge enters. He calls his first case; it is our case. The defendant enters the courtroom. Until now, I had only seen his mug shot after he'd been arrested. He is of average height. Overweight. Pale skinned. Dark hair, shaved head. Orange jumpsuit, the prison uniform. I hate him. I stare at him, willing my eyes to bore into the back of

his head, hot, so it hurts him. Almost kills him. I wish pain on his soul. On his deepest subconscious thoughts.

I ask to speak first. I am nervous, but I am too angry to show it. I am sitting next to Daniel, my cousin and Nilsen counterpart. We are the same age. He is holding my hand. He feels like the closest person to me right now. I want to sit near my mom, but not too close. It is too painful here. I need my physical distance to cope, but I don't want too much distance. My mom sits in front of me, next to her parents and her brother. I watch carefully, wanting to hear each and every word. I want to miss nothing.

It is my turn; I walk toward the front of the courtroom with my speech in hand. I look at the judge and begin to speak, but then I turn my gaze toward the defendant. I stare directly into his eyes, and I tell him how much I loathe him. That he's taken everything. That he's a coward and a fool. But I do not direct my words to him; I instead address the court, which is more powerful (and a requirement of the court). I chide him for leaving my mother stranded, upside down on the side of the road. Maybe if he had stayed, my father would be alive. Instead, he suffocated in the amount of time he hung upside down in the vehicle. Had someone helped him in that moment of crisis, he may be here today. I do not cry. My voice does not waver. My voice is shrill, fierce, and clear. I have practiced this moment at home to ensure I won't crack or break. I do not want to give him the satisfaction of seeing my tears. I speak on behalf of my mother and myself. I speak on behalf of other people who have also suffered. He stares back at me. Emotionless. Just watching. I do not look away. I tell him I want him to remember my

face, so that in his darkest hour, he will remember how much the world outside the prison walls hate him.

After others speak, the defendant asks to make a statement. He begins to say that he did not make a mistake, that he did what so many other people have done; he just got caught. I suddenly hear a voice yelling; it screams “shut up!” A hand clamps down over my mouth – it is my cousin, Daniel. He has forced me back into my seat and covered my mouth with his hand. Later, I notice a mark on my cheek from his ring.

Suddenly court officers are entering and staring at me. I sit, defiantly; I feel the adrenaline, partnered with fear, coursing through my body. I will not back down. I shed my invisibility with purpose. I want to be visible, and I want the world to know I hate him. I expect to be kicked out of court, held in contempt as I’ve seen in the movies – I’ve had no real-life exposure to courtroom protocol.

At the end of the sentencing, where the defendant receives 28 years in prison, several court officers approach me. I am wary – unsure of what to expect. I feel my body, more present than ever, yet I also feel numb and indifferent. They each hug me, and tell me that if “someone had killed my sister and said those things, I would tell them to ‘shut up’ too.” One of the officers says to me, “As far as we’re concerned, nothing happened in this courtroom... you tell him – tell him to shut up.” Another woman I don’t know approaches me. She scares me...why is she here? But then she leans into me and hugs me. I move between tension and relief. It is over, yet it feels anticlimactic. I realize that the only end here is the finality of the sentencing. The sentencing did not

make this loss go away, and I do not feel the sense of peace I expected to wash over me. Instead, I feel worse and incomplete. It is over.

In the courtroom, I experience different tensions simultaneously (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). I move between loss and confusion; visibility and invisibility; from duty and purpose to lost; from a clear, well-shaped identity as a sister to identity-less, or a “fractured identity” (Hastings, 2000). By making myself visible, I am able to resist the defendant’s actions, to push back. In the courtroom, for the first time in more than a year, I break my silence and yell. I feel myself move between the tensions of silence and voice, and invisibility and visibility.

Monday, September 24, 2001. Last week, I confronted the man who killed my father and sister, and who injured my mother. No one knows. I sit in class and listen to my sociology instructor talk about sexual fetishes. I sit in the back of the class, isolated, invisible, silent. Can anyone see the grief on my face, in my body language? Do my peers think I am strange? I feel like the odd one out – like the “other.” I move between relief that no one knows, and isolation because no one knows, as with disclosure comes risk of judgment (i.e., Toller, 2005). If only I could find the words to talk about this experience. But I convince myself that this is just an excuse. No one really cares.

During the semester, I miss a paper deadline, as well as a final in the same class – sociology. I am mortified. This is not intentional, but an honest misunderstanding of the due dates. I show up on the wrong day – the day after it was administered – to take it. My instructor is notably surprised. She tells me that she is concerned and confused with my behavior, as the work I complete in class is well done, but to just not show up to a

final is beyond her comprehension. I did not tell her what happened, that my father and sister had been killed a few months ago. Instead, I asked if there was anything I could do to make up the exam. She allowed me to take the final at a later date, and she knocked a grade off as the penalty. I was grateful that she worked with me and allowed me to remain closed. And it was this fact that allowed me to open up to her.

After I submitted my exam, I told her – almost apologetically – “I know that I’ve been a little out of it this semester. My father and my sister were killed in a car accident in May, and I think it might be affecting me.”

She looked at me and said, “It probably is. It’s probably post-traumatic stress.” And then she said, “Krista, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” I replied.

“Was it a drunk driver?”

“Yes,” and I smiled back at her to let her know that I’m okay – don’t worry, I won’t cry, I’m stronger than that. I can feel the frog in my throat and my chest feels tight with discomfort. She smiles back at me and nods. I say goodbye. This was the last time I spoke with her.

I often think of her and wonder how she is. I will always remember her kindness and her willingness to work with me *without* having prior knowledge of what happened. I wanted to remain closed because moving toward a space of openness – where I share this loss with others – felt like an excuse or a weakness. Remaining closed was the easier option, it was like acting.

The loss of my sister and my father continue to take shape in different ways in the years following the accident: the seemingly endless procedural complexities and delays of the criminal trial; witnesses who are willing and unwilling to cooperate; life insurance claims; probate; settling with the defendant rather than going through a trial; photographs of the accident; and the “drunk driver” appealing his case three different times over several years following his conviction. During this time, I also attend college with students and professors who have no prior knowledge of this loss or of the legal obligations when I am away from school. I feel a constant pull between my role as a student and peer, and my role as a grieving sister and daughter. As a result, I perform these roles simultaneously, moving in, out and through a space of liminality negotiated via dialectical tensions.

September 2003. My mom calls me in my dorm at Northern Arizona University; it is my first semester living away from everything familiar since the accident. I am working toward my degree in public relations, and I am still feeling uneasy in my new surroundings. My mother tells me about a letter she received, alerting her that the defendant has appealed his sentence three times, and each time, he has been denied. She lets me know because she is disturbed by this news, yet relieved he has been denied.

I feel sick, I cry, I don’t want to leave my dorm room and be seen in public. The man who killed my sister and my father believes he is innocent. So much so, that he has appealed his sentence not once, but three different times. My heart feels hollow.

Later that day, I go to class, but I am unable to focus. I find that I do not enjoy Arizona, that I feel alone. Even more alone with my grief. I feel silenced. I have no

network of support, no one with whom I can speak. So instead, I internalize my grief, suppressing it so I am able to move forward. I am once again grateful for my anonymity, yet lonely without a community that understands.

As a surviving sibling, I experience a web of contradictions. Within the classroom, I feel a constant pull between being student and being a peer and between being a grieving sister and being an only child. At times, I allow one role to overcome the other. I “let go of one pole and collapse into the other” (Palmer, 2004, p. 175).

There may be “infinite possibilities for oppositions” in grief and loss (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 44). These oppositions, or tensions, function in different ways, depending on the context. From tensions surrounding disclosure (i.e., Toller, 2005) to contradictions pertaining to identity (i.e., Hastings, 2000), there are many tensions the grieving may experience, which simultaneously pull us in opposing directions.

Arizona, March 2004. I live alone in a townhouse in Flagstaff, Arizona. The townhouse is situated on a cul-de-sac in a small community of 15 homes. I move in with the intent of getting roommates, but I decide that living by myself is better, and offers me the “alone time” I desire. Sometimes I crave the interaction of roommates, but decide that the benefits of living alone outweigh the benefits of roommates.

The alarm clock slices into the silence of my dark bedroom. It just barely shakes me out of my deep sleep. I hit snooze; I just need 10 more minutes. I glance at the clock. It is 11:00 a.m. I have to be in class in 30 minutes. Did I really sleep 15 hours last night? Each night, I seem to be sleeping longer and longer hours. Yet no matter how many hours I sleep, I am still tired. I walk through my days in a fog. I feel alone, lost. No one

knows. Lately, I can't stop thinking about Kari. Nor can I separate thoughts of her from my father. I also think about the face of the person who did this; the person who, without apology or remorse, took them from me. I am unable to make meaning out of this loss, to understand how this loss may have served a greater purpose. It just does not make sense. I feel heavy, as if an elephant sits on my chest each day, and the only time it lifts to give me relief is while I sleep, and when I drink. Wine at bedtime helps me sleep; it is a form of self-medication for the ever-increasing anxiety attacks I experience. When I awake, the elephant returns to constrict my heart.

I am afraid of class, afraid of the grocery store, afraid of my neighbors. I leave my house less and less each week out of fear of who may see me looking like this. Tired, pale, sick.

Am I suicidal? No. But I want the world to stop for a while.

I need time to hide away from the world and be alone. Yet I feel too alone, as if I could disappear from this place and no one would ever notice. I become paranoid that someone will try to take me. I feel unsafe. I know these thoughts and fears are irrational, but I can't stop thinking them.

I miss having friends, but I don't want any new friends. I call my best friend in California once to cry and talk. But it is late – I seem to be unaware of time these days – and she is tired and does not have the energy to give the support I seek. This is the last time I call someone to talk about it. I buy enough wine to hold me over for the week and food I can prepare easily. I don't want my neighbors to see me, to wonder about me. I don't leave my house for three days. I drink to self-medicate. I eat when I'm hungry,

which is less and less often. In class – when I go to class – I ignore my peers. I have nothing in common with these people. I just barely pay attention to my instructors. I feel left out, but I feel unable to interact.

* * *

I show up to my “Introduction to Public Relations” course, which is a mid-afternoon class. A young girl in the course turns to me and looks at the scarf I am wearing.

“How are people wearing their scarves this year?”

I look at her and say (a little too harshly), “*What?*”

She smiles and repeats, “How are people wearing their scarves this year? There are different trends.” I can see that she wants to engage in conversation, but I don’t want to talk about anything with anyone.

“Oh,” I say. But instead of engaging her, I say, “I don’t know.” And I turn away from her, waiting for class to begin.

* * *

I have missed several classes this semester, which I slept through, or couldn’t muster the energy to attend. I now have an “F” in photography. I stopped going to the evening class more than a month ago. I cannot stay up that late, and I get nervous when I am out past dark. I miss the deadline for dropping, and I don’t think to try for an official withdraw, nor do I care (I regularly move between fear and indifference these days, both entangled in the web of contradictions I experience). I also feel like it is an excuse; I know something is wrong, but I am unable to pinpoint the issue. Therefore, I deduce that

this is only in my head and I should keep it to myself; I also fear the stigmatization and the judgment that may accompany my anxiety and depression (i.e., Goffman, 1963).

One day, I cannot breathe. I feel suffocated, afraid – even more so than usual. I cry until there are no tears, and even then, I continue to cry; I feel cold and alone. This is the worst anxiety attack yet. My mother is travelling, and I have been unable to contact her for the past two weeks – it feels like a year. So I call my best friend in California. She tells me to buy a plane ticket and to come home, and she suggests we go stay with my mother's parents for the weekend.

She picks me up at an airport near her, far from my hometown, which is comforting to me. I don't want anyone else to see me like this. I immediately feel better in the presence of someone with whom I can really talk – not just on the phone, but face to face. The immediacy of my best friend helps. We stay at a hotel that evening and talk about depression. The next morning, we drive to my grandparents' house. We stay there for two nights. We talk about the issues I am facing, why I feel the way I do. No one is sure of what is going on, but they encourage me to visit the campus doctor as soon as I return to school. Everyone agrees I should try to complete the semester and then move home.

For the year I am in Arizona, I disclose the loss of Kari and my grief to one person. I do not tell my instructors, as I feel as this is an excuse for my apparent lack of motivation. I fear that my depression, anxiety attacks and grief have begun to mark me – that people can see it just by looking at me. I will myself to become invisible. I still do not leave my house for days at a time. I try to adapt, but I eventually collapse.

I am drowning, but I refuse to ask for help, as I don't want to risk my fellow classmates and my professors – who are grading (judging) me – thinking I am not alright. I perceive my loss and my depression as a weakness. Similar to Hollander (2004), “I did not like feeling judged inadequate in some way because I grieve ... it is with me always but I do not always show it to others” (p. 204). In this case, I show my grief to no one.

April 2004. As I move deeper into depression, and as I feel myself pulled between an ever-growing list of tensions, into an endless liminality, I am unsure of my options. I don't know with whom I can speak – safely – about the depression, anxiety attacks and my options in school. I reluctantly make an appointment to visit an on-campus doctor. He is not a counselor, but I believe he may be able to help me get through the last six weeks of the semester.

As I sit in his office, I do not feel comfortable. He asks me a bit about myself. I go blank. Next, he asks me about my family, and I try to explain to him why I believe I am having anxiety attacks. I am cut off by a strange sensation; I feel as if I am choking on my own breath. I cannot speak and I begin to cry. And then I blurt it out: “My sister and father died in an accident almost four years ago, and it's fine... but I can't reach my mom because she's travelling, and I've never been out of touch like this.” I feel ashamed to admit it aloud. Four years is enough time, I think. I should be okay.

“I see,” he says. He hands me a box of tissues. He looks uncomfortable.

“I think I'm getting anxiety attacks,” I say, trying to shift topics.

We talk about my symptoms; we discuss anxiety attacks. He suggests that my depression may be based on the fact that I am so far from my family, coupled with my

loss. I tell him that I am moving home as soon as the semester finishes. He says I should take something for the depression until the end of the semester when I move home. I tell him that I don't want to take anything, but he assures me it will help me with my anxiety attacks, and that I should be okay to go off the medication once I arrive home. He also tells me that he is surprised I lasted as long as I did without coming to talk with someone sooner.

* * *

I feel as if the grief is just waiting...waiting for a solitary moment to pounce on my subconscious and take over. I live with my depression silently for nearly eight months before I can take it no longer.

The year I spend in Arizona is painful. This is the year when I feel the full impact of the void left behind the death of my sister and my father. I also feel the void of my previous identities; they haunt me. *I am no longer a sister in a 4-person household. I am an only child in a single-parent household.* And as I attempt to negotiate my new role and identity within society as a whole, I also try to define myself as a student and peer. The definitions of each identity contradict the other, making it challenging – if not impossible – for me to find my “self.”

Mid-November 2005. As a surviving sibling who lost her sister to a drunk driver, I encounter many dialectical tensions that challenge my role as a peer and as a surviving sibling. I have a license plate frame on my car that was gifted to me by Kari's friends. It says, “K.A.R.I. **K**ids **A**gainst **R**iding **I**ntoxicated,” which is a club that Kari's friends started at their high school after her death, as a way to discourage drinking and

driving. I pull into school. A young student approaches me, seeing my ski racks on my car and reading the license plate. “Kids against riding intoxicated... what is *that*?”

“Well,” I say, unsure at first of how much to disclose, “my sister’s name was Kari, and she was killed by a drunk driver. This is a club her friends started to discourage drinking and driving.” I am proud of myself for saying it aloud.

“Whoa... I thought you were talking about riding [snowboarding] and drinking, and I was like, I do my best riding when I’m drinking!” As he laughs, I smile awkwardly, unsure of how to respond to this statement.

Interactions like this occur often, and I am not the only surviving sibling who faces these situations. College parties are difficult to attend; watching people stagger out of the party and to their car is offensive, yet difficult to challenge. Going to a movie and listening to my peers laugh at scenes depicting drunk driving is frustrating and turns my stomach. Listening to my peers brag about drinking and driving during class is painful – this happens more often than I would like to admit. Answering questions about the status of my siblinghood is also difficult. The desire to fit in, yet to maintain my position on drinking and driving, becomes more challenging. If I state my argument each time I see a peer engage in drinking and driving, then I am confrontational (or confronted) each instance and forced to revisit the loss of Kari as a way of justifying my position.

My sister’s death has made me different from my peers; I think about death all the time, and I worry that someone I love very much will be next. I don’t engage in life in the same carefree manner anymore. I wish to handle my grief differently, to process my

grief in a more wholesome and accepting manner. I hope to talk about my grief as I experience it, rather than swallow my grief in an attempt to hide it from others.

Palmer (2004) states that we exist in a tragic gap: “a gap between the way things are and the way we know they might be” (p. 175). My hope is that, by embracing this tragic gap, I may learn to hold the tension. By standing in the tragic gap “between reality and possibility, this small, tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world’s suffering and joy, despair and hope” (Palmer, 2004, p. 178). Through an exploration of dialectical tensions and liminality, I want to help emergent adult surviving siblings, academic departments, institutions, professors, supervisors, professional organizations and communication scholars make sense of the seemingly erratic behaviors and emotions that follow the death of a sibling as a result of drunk driving, which is a violent loss. Unfortunately, we cannot absolutely stop the world from engaging in acts of violence, like drinking and driving. However, we can work toward a loving environment where healthy grief may take shape, and where we may better understand, acknowledge and embrace dialectical tensions. We may work toward a space where hearts are free to break and grow, rather than remain hollow with hurt.

* * *

Over time, I have arrived in my own space of grief that guides me toward this work. And it is through the Communication Studies program at San José State University, and the incredible people I have met here, that I am able to engage in this work. I arrived in this program with the intention of engaging in health communication

and media studies – I wanted to study sexually transmitted disease and media effects. I gave little attention to my loss as a significant experience that shapes me. I feel that it is irrelevant and not of great importance, as there has never really been a space for my grief. As a result, I assume this is normal and okay.

It is in my graduate program that I analyze and explore the boundaries of my grief for the first time. It is in this program where I meet Michaela, the person who will become my grief partner and close friend, and who is incredibly supportive and a driving force in motivating this work. After our Communication Education class, I notice that Michaela looks upset. I approach her, cautiously. I feel upset as well. We have discussed an autoethnographic article in class that addresses the educational experience in a touching and troubling manner. Nainby and Pea's (2003) article, "Immobility in mobility: Narratives of social class, education, and paralysis," seems to have struck a personal chord with each of us. In this writing, the authors discuss the endless/timeless boundaries of loss and grief. As people stand around talking and file out of the class, she says to me, "I should just tell you," and her eyes well up with tears; "my brother just passed away last year." Her younger brother and sister-in-law were killed in a car crash not even a year before while traveling across the country.

As she tells me this, I also begin to well up with tears. Her honesty and her willingness to share this information with me is comforting to me. She gets it, she knows what it is like, and she has been sitting here in class for the past month pretending to be okay. From that moment and forward, we are close. There is an unspoken understanding between us in that we understand the void permanently left in each other's lives. Today,

Michaela is inspires me. When I feel discouraged in this work, or as if it no longer makes sense, I talk with her about it. I also like to think that she can call me to talk about her experiences anytime as well. We have talked in the past about how, without having to restate it, we understand the pain and awkwardness this loss can cause. People don't know what to say, nor do they know how to respond. And that is okay. But it wasn't until I met Michaela that I found the strength and the motivation to engage in this work. She helped me see its importance.

* * *

Chapter 1 has served to offer insight into my interests in the dialectical tensions college-aged survivors, who have lost their sibling(s) to a drunk driver, experience. In the following four chapters, I will discuss this particular topic in a literature review section (Chapter 2), a methods section (Chapter 3), a findings section (Chapter 4) and a conclusion (Chapter 5). Chapter 2 will review the literature within the field of communication and beyond and will further clarify the need for this particular work in the communication studies field. Chapter 3 will detail the methods and procedures I utilize throughout this study as well as identify the paradigmatic thrust driving this work. Chapter 4 seeks to make meaning in this type of loss and also illuminates the patterns and overarching themes that emerged in this work. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of these findings as well as highlight suggestions for future work in this area.

Each chapter in this thesis begins with an autoethnographic reflection that highlights my experience of sibling loss; it is in these reflections that the reader experiences the tone and theme of each chapter. My hope is that my story, and the stories

of others, will help to shed light on dialectical tensions associated with this type of loss, as well as how liminality works with dialectical tensions as a process.

I believe this research will help scholars in the field of communication better understand the needs of surviving siblings, and the many dialectical tensions they experience. This research has the potential to provide insight as to how surviving siblings may best negotiate these tensions, providing a healthier outlet for their grief in society, interpersonally and across instructional and professional contexts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Normally, I feel invisible, silenced. Always grappling with disclosure, language, grief, how much is too much... But today, I am excited. For the first time in nine years, there is a sibling loss support group, which I eagerly join. These resources did not exist for me when the accident occurred. I need this support in order to embark on the research for this paper. To recollect all of the painful memories. To be present with my grief.

I speak with the representative of the support group, Ellen. She contacts me to talk a little more about my situation. She wants me to know that while she honors my interest in joining the support group for sibling loss, she tells me that most people who join the group have sustained a loss within the past year, and she doesn't know whether I will feel comfortable around people with emotions so "raw."

I immediately choke up, but I try to hide it from her on the phone. I tell her I have a cold. I don't know if she believes me. But I suddenly feel what I felt nine years ago. There is no place for me to grieve. Where am I supposed to go? There was no group for me then, and I have just been told there is no group for me now. I feel isolated, as if I should have stopped grieving nine years ago. But I don't know how to do that.

Ellen chooses her words carefully, trying to clarify that she is proud of me for reaching out to get help, but letting me know that maybe one-on-one counseling is what I need because after this much time – then she catches herself. Ellen assures me that she does not believe I should have already moved on from my grief. She tells me that grief comes in different stages of life. But I feel betrayed. Uncomfortable. I no longer want to attend.

While her words are not meant to wound, they do. Once again – similar to nine years ago – I feel marginalized. I feel as if I am an “other.” How do I negotiate this feeling of immense loss and displacement? Before, my loss was too raw to discuss. Now it has been too long since my loss. I am disappointed.

I get off the phone, racked with intense emotions – rejection, loss, loneliness, silence, guilt. I feel as if, after making the effort to pick up the phone and sign up for a difficult group (not an easy decision), I’ve learned my grief is no longer valid. Instead, Ellen asked me whether I would be interested in facilitating a group. This is the same situation I found myself in immediately following the accident, as there were no support groups for people my age at the time. So instead, I attended group meetings to share my experience with parents so they would remember their surviving children throughout their grief. But there was no place for my grief. Now, I find myself here again.

* * *

The relationship we have with our sibling(s) is often the longest relationship we will have in our lives. This study explores loss and illuminates how emerging adult siblings negotiate dialectical tensions when a drunk driver kills their siblings. Emerging adults are young adults from 18 to 30 years of age. They exist in a liminal space. According to Arnett (2000), emerging adults “have no name for the period they are in – because the society they live in has no name for it – so they regard themselves as being neither adolescents nor adults, in between the two but not really one or the other” (p. 471). I hope to learn how emerging adults negotiate tensions across instructional and professional contexts and how liminality also facilitates and complicates this negotiation.

While the loss of a sibling is a traumatic experience at any age, this loss is particularly difficult during emergent adulthood. This may affect our interactions with our peers, our quality and level of coursework, and our ability to interact on a societal level. Arnett (2000) states that emergent adulthood pertains to young adults between their late teens and through the twenties. According to Arnett (2000), “emerging adulthood is a distinct period demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations” (p. 469). In addition to identity negotiation, college is a time in life where individuals are already often stretched beyond their normal capacity for coping. “Returning to college after a funeral” may result in students experiencing “a sense of unreality, or a feeling of living in a surreal world” (White, 2006, p. 17). Returning to college after losing a sibling to a drunk driver may have a significant impact on identity. White (2006) finds that the most common effect among bereaved siblings in college is “a sense of feeling different from others” (p. 17). White (2006) identifies community as an important component in the grieving process for surviving siblings in college, but notes that many students will wear a “mask” to hide their grief (p. 18). While White’s (2006) research focuses on the internal, psychological process of grief, she does recommend “articulating thoughts and feelings about the loss to a trusted person” (p. 18), which is a central communicative process of grief – talking about it.

Surviving siblings may be pulled in opposite directions as they negotiate their new role in the world and define their new identities as emerging adults. “The role once held in high school disappears, once-popular students are now unknown, and there is a stressful period of reorganization and finding a new niche in a new environment. Losing

a sibling on top of all this is challenging indeed” (White, 2006, p. 17). In emerging adulthood, identity is shifting, and the issues of drunk driving surrounding sibling loss have a significant impact on an identity. There are more opportunities to engage in risky behavior, like drunk driving and substance abuse, which raises a host of dialectical tensions and contradictions for surviving siblings at this point in their lives.

In emerging adulthood, old identities are being questioned by exposure to new and different ideas than those with which they encountered at home. “In their educational paths, [emergent adults] try out various possibilities that would prepare them for different kinds of future work. College students often change majors more than once, especially in their first two years, as they try on possible occupational futures, discard them, and pursue others. With graduate school becoming an increasingly common choice after an undergraduate degree is obtained, emerging adults' educational explorations often continue through their early twenties and midtwenties” (Arnett, 2000, p. 474). Emerging adulthood is a space where worldviews shift and evolve, allowing for identity to shift and evolve – we might consider this a space of liminality.

Loss is dialectical and liminal in emerging adulthood. As we define our evolving identities and struggle with understanding our new roles in society as emerging adults, the loss of a sibling further complicates our understanding of the self and of identity. We are betwixt and between our old role as a sibling and our new role as a surviving sibling. Everything that has defined us up to this point is now in flux – in a liminal state. From our place in the family system and our interpersonal relationships, to the relationships we have/had with our sibling(s), we are forever changed. Amidst the sudden and violent loss

of a sibling during emerging adulthood, e.g., due to a drunk driver, survivors often feel pulled simultaneously between contradictions.

My peers' decision to drink and drive affected our interpersonal relationships, as well as my ability to effectively communicate my concerns. According to Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), "three in every 10 Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash in their lives" (<http://www.madd.org/Drunk-Driving.aspx>). Furthermore, Arnett (2000) finds that risk behavior, like substance abuse and drunk driving, peaks "not during adolescence but during emerging adulthood" (pp. 474-475). This points to the importance of evaluating sibling loss in emerging adulthood related to drunk driving. The risk behaviors surviving siblings face complicate communication and friendship.

Loss is highly dialectical. Our new identities shift and take shape out of this loss and out of the multiple, opposing tensions that exist in liminal spaces. The way we negotiate and talk about these tensions is important. Therefore, our communication surrounding dialectical tensions – and whether we are acknowledging these tensions at all – is critical in the grief process. For example, these tensions may have a direct impact on the quality of our work across instructional and professional contexts. It was very easy for me to walk away from school on two different occasions. Due to the support and encouragement I received from my family and friends, I eventually returned to finish my undergraduate education. I still feel a dialectical pull between the desire to do well academically and the feeling that none of it really matters. This is a tension that emerged

from my loss, and this is shared by one of the surviving siblings I interviewed for this study as well.

Many scholars have discussed dialectical tensions and how these tensions relate to loss. The work to date is compelling and covers a variety of situations pertaining to loss. Unfortunately, there is very little work concerning loss associated with drunk driving, sudden sibling loss, and loss in emerging adulthood. Collectively, there is no existing research within the field of communication about the intersection of these three areas. Due to the lack of research pertaining to emerging adult surviving siblings who have suffered their loss to a drunk driver, the literature herein will focus on existing research surrounding loss and dialectical tensions, liminality, stigma, and other preexisting research in the field of communication that directly relates to death. Currently, there is a gap in the research concerning dialectical tensions and sibling loss. This study attempts to bridge that gap.

This literature review will examine preexisting research through the following categories: Dialectical Tensions, Dialectics and Loss, Liminality and Stigma in Dialectics, and Narrative in Communicating Loss. Dialectical Tensions will provide a background of dialectical theory and its functions. Dialectics and Loss will illustrate the connection between dialectical tensions and death and loss. Liminality and Stigma in Dialectics will briefly discuss the liminal state of loss, the role of stigma in dialectical theory and loss, and how this relates to surviving siblings. Finally, Narrative in Communicating Loss will provide a brief overview of related studies in the field of communication that touch on grief and the benefits of narrative in the grieving process.

There are few studies related to sudden loss and/or sibling loss (i.e., Ellis, 1993; Lindemann, 2004; Shuler, 2007). I have incorporated those that exist where appropriate.

Dialectical Tensions

The primary framework for this study is dialectical theory, which has grown out of relational dialectics theory (RDT). Through this framework, I hope to illuminate the dialectical tensions experienced by surviving siblings and how they navigate those tensions across instructional and professional contexts. It is noteworthy that Baxter and Montgomery do not discuss dialectics as a theory in *Relating* (1996), but do discuss this concept as a theory in “A guide to dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships” (1998). As a result, I will defer to Baxter and Montgomery’s (1998) more recent publication in which they name dialectical theory.

Dialectical tensions are contradictions experienced simultaneously. Contradictions are inherent in communication. “Communication plays a ... significant role in the ongoing experience of contradictions” (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 157). Communicators experience these contradictions – or tensions – as “both/and” rather than “and/or.” Dialectical tensions, which consist of contradictions, exist around us, in every decision we make, including those decisions surrounding sibling loss due to drunk driving. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) believe that “social life exists in and through people’s communicative practices, by which people give voice to multiple (perhaps even infinite) opposing tendencies” (p. 4). In my experience, the grief process has functioned as a “ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3). In terms of dialectical theory, surviving siblings exist between

simultaneous tensions, interpersonally, as well as in the interplay between interpersonal and larger sociocultural phenomena, which include academic and professional environments.

Because we co-create meaning together, we reinforce and perpetuate tensions. For example, in chapter one I discuss my desire to be alone and my desire to have friends. Yet I repeatedly chose to isolate myself, perpetuating the tensions associated with loneliness. I allowed myself to re-construct this same tension over and over again.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) highlight four different “assumptions that characterize dialectics” (p. 13). Those assumptions are: contradiction, change, praxis, and totality (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 17). We might think of these assumptions as qualities of dialectics. Below I will discuss each of these four qualities in further detail.

Contradiction. The first quality of dialectical theory is contradiction. We face contradictions daily, and constantly move between opposing forces. “Contradiction”...refers to the “dynamic interplay between unified oppositions” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 8). Contradictions do not simply exist as polar opposites, but rather, they exist in a matrix of many, simultaneously occurring contradictions (p. 9). As a result of these contradictions, “individuals continually face the contradictory impulses to be open and disclosive versus closed and protective of self or of other” (Dindia, 1996, p. 84). For example, a surviving sibling’s experience in college may pull her/him between two contradictory poles at once: Between openness about her/his loss and closedness to protect and hide the pain associated with that loss. Contradictions are not

only necessary, but are “major drivers of change” (Baxter & Montgomery 1996, p. 7). Furthermore, contradictions are “multivocal,” meaning contradictions may have different meanings. Rather than the conceptualizing contradictions as “oversimplified binary structures like openness and closedness,” multivocality broadens the definition “to more complicated meanings like the tensions between expressiveness, verbal disclosure, directness, honesty, on the one hand, and privacy regulation, deception, ambiguity, and discreteness, on the other” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 30). This is an important concept in negotiating the dialectical tensions experienced by emerging adult surviving siblings who have lost a brother or sister to a drunk driver. Various multivocal tensions that accompany openness-closedness arose in this study. I will discuss those tensions in greater detail in chapter four.

I discuss my battle with depression in chapter one, which is a good example of negotiating contradictions in a less effective way. But then I discuss the positive ways in which I negotiate these tensions today (i.e., engaging in this field of research). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) believe that “contradictions are inherent in social life and not evidence of failure or inadequacy in a person or in a social system” (p. 7). This highlights the importance of contradictions in dialectical tensions. While tensions may be uncomfortable, they may also serve to move us toward positive change. Currently, as a graduate student engaging in this work, I regularly face the contradiction of pursuing grief communication as a field of study, or turning toward something that is easier for me, emotionally. I move forward, along this pull, but each day, I choose grief

communication. This is an example of allowing myself to grow in the tension – of using contradictions to perpetuate positives.

The contradictions people experience between life as college students and life as surviving siblings are not direct, polar opposites, but may still (at the same time) exist in contradiction with each other in complex and sometimes subtle ways. It is contradictions that lead us to the next quality of dialectical tensions, change. Contradiction and change are interrelated and inseparable qualities of dialectical theory.

Change. Change is the second quality of dialectical theory, and is an inherent component of dialectical tensions. For the purposes of this study, I will embrace the spiraling model of change. Spiraling change “involves recurrence but recognizes that phenomena never repeat in identical form” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 13). Spiraling change “combines both directional change (movement to somewhere different) with cyclical change (patterned repetition)” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1998, p. 7). Growth tends to take place in those moments of tension, which moves us toward change. “Stability and change form a dialectical unity ... Dialectical change is the interplay of stability and flux” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 10). I have experienced change within tensions, which I will further discuss in chapter five.

Change and contradiction are intertwined and work together. Contradictions are drivers of change. The larger contradiction will outweigh all others, and determine the change to take place. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), “the principal contradiction is the primary driver of change, that is, the contradiction whose existence and development determines or influences the existence and development of other

secondary contradictions” (p. 11). As a surviving sibling, my desire to fit in is in direct tension with my desire to mourn. In a social environment, these tensions are situated away from each other in the web of dialectical tensions. If my desire to mourn overtakes my desire to fit in with my peers, then the change may result in a feeling of otherness, but it is a choice I make based on primary and secondary contradictions. In chapter one, I discuss my desire to fit in as in tension with my desire to mourn. I allowed my desire to fit in to outweigh the latter, which resulted in negative change. I missed deadlines, felt disoriented, and continued to feel othered. In the end, I did myself a disservice in the grieving process by not acknowledging the tensions. Instead, I gave in to what was easy at that time – homogeny. But this was the only way I knew – to walk through in a silent, invisible state. It is possible that anything more visible may have opened me up to damage that otherwise did not occur. This brings up the question as to how tensions are negotiated among surviving siblings who have lost a brother or sister to a drunk driver, and which tensions outweigh others.

As human beings, when we make a change, it is often due to a conscious decision. It is our previous (and anticipated) experiences and actions that guide the changes we make. This is praxis, the third characteristic of dialectical theory.

Praxis. Praxis will allow me to explore the ways in which surviving siblings perpetuate or change certain communicative patterns, and the ways in which society reinforces these communication patterns. In praxis, “people are at once actors and objects of their own actions” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 13). “Individuals both act and are acted on; their actions in the present are constrained and enabled by prior actions

and function to create the conditions to which they will respond in the future” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 9). For example, every decision I make is guided by my loss. I answer every question about my family unit based on previous experiences and anticipated outcomes. Friendships with peers evolve out of the way my sister was killed – by a drunk driver – and whether these new acquaintances respect this, or disregard this (e.g., engage in behaviors that include drinking and driving or discouraging talking about it at all).

Praxis may serve as a positive means for proactive, productive communication surrounding grief communication, as we can make a choice in communicating loss. Dindia (1998) asserts that “people are proactive actors who make communicative choices in how to deal with the contradictions and the contradictions, in turn, affect their subsequent communication actions” (pp. 91-92). I appreciate this proactive stance toward communication, as this lends to the power we have as individuals to consciously choose how to communicate loss and the dialectical tensions that arise, which also may help us better navigate our liminal state. Contradictions, which are the components of tensions, are important in negotiating loss. It is possible to negotiate contradictions in positive ways, as well as in negative ways. The communication patterns that emerge based on this negotiation of contradictions evolve in different ways. Surviving siblings make their own communicative choices across educational and professional contexts when negotiating opposing tensions. I will explore the different “patterns of praxis” employed by surviving siblings in negotiating their grief in chapter four.

Tensions do not exist independently of each other, but are instead entangled in a much larger web of simultaneous contradictions that guide praxis in communication. These simultaneously occurring tensions make up the fourth quality of dialectical theory: Totality.

Totality. Totality states that all tensions are dependent on each other and exist in relation to other tensions. Totality allows “phenomena...[to] be understood only in relation to other phenomena” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 14). In other words, tensions do not exist independently of one another. Instead, there are many, related (and unrelated) tensions occurring simultaneously at all times. For example, a surviving sibling cannot be so without having sustained the loss of his or her sibling – this person cannot be one without having experienced the other. This experience may shape who this person is today, the decisions he or she makes, and the beliefs this person holds.

Tensions may also exist on a subconscious level, often unnoticed by the person experiencing the contradictions. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) state “a dialectical tension does not need to be consciously felt or described. Dialectical interplay may work ‘backstage’ beyond partners’ mindful awareness, nonetheless contributing to relational change” (p. 15). While I may not recognize each tension I experience, these tensions still exist and contribute to my experience in this role.

It is important to illuminate these tensions I and other surviving siblings experience in order to better understand the many communicative choices we make – not solely in grief communication, but in all communication practices. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) find that “communicative choices made in the present are steeped in

historicity; they inherit the constraints imposed by prior actions and cultural socialization” (p. 67). Every decision a surviving sibling makes may be informed by the fact that a drunk driver killed his or her sibling(s). For example, “no matter what [I am] doing, no matter how thoroughly engaged [I] may be in work, study, or conversation, there remains an uneasy feeling of expectancy – an on-edge sensation – as if something terrible is about to happen” (Wray, 2003, p. 197). Ten years ago, when my sister was still in my life, I did not think in these terms. But today, my decision making process, and my behaviors, are informed by my loss. It is the totality of these tensions that guide my choices. Other surviving siblings also share this experience.

All four of these qualities of dialectics – contradiction, change, praxis and totality – are intertwined and work together. Throughout this study, I hope to better understand how these concepts function within the culture of emerging adult surviving siblings, and how surviving siblings negotiate these tensions in academic and professional environments.

Dialectics and Loss

There is a strong link between dialectical theory and grief. The tensions experienced by emerging adult surviving siblings who have lost their sibling(s) to drunk drivers differ significantly from parents who have lost a child, or from hospice workers who aid in end-of-life care. But there is also overlap, as all of these situations entail grief, loss and death.

Dialectical theory has room for innumerable tensions, depending on the individual and the context of the loss. After the loss of my sister, I was devastated; yet I was

grateful and almost joyous that my mother's life was spared. Even in the most sullen moments of my grief, I felt a constant pull between joy and grief – guilt fell somewhere between the two. In their study of dialectical tensions among parents who experience a premature birth of their child, Golish and Powell (2003) find “joy-grief” to be a common dialectical tension. Golish and Powell (2003) discuss the “cautious joy” a mother feels when she holds her healthy, premature baby in her arms (p. 320). Every moment of joy is marked by loss, thus creating a cautious joy. Furthermore, each moment of happiness is also marked by an emotional and visceral pain, reminding us of our loss and grief in the moment of happiness.

While tensions may vary depending on the type of loss, the bereaved, and countless other circumstance-specific issues, there are similarities across grief contexts. I often experience a tension of openness-closedness, as do other siblings in this study. This tension serves as a decision making tool in determining whether I am comfortable discussing my loss with faculty, school administrators, supervisors or peers and colleagues. An emergent adult who has lost his or her sibling may try to negotiate his or her role as student, peer, employee and surviving sibling – all contradictory and opposing forces. Toller's (2005) work concerning dialectical tensions and loss provides insight into the grieving process; while her study pertains to parents grieving the loss of a child, these experiences also translate to sibling loss. In her study, Toller (2005) finds that bereaved parents experience a dialectical tension between openness and closedness in determining whether to disclose loss (p. 46). When people ask me whether I have a sister, I typically want to say yes. But often, I say no. My desire to remain close

to my sister, to honor the 15 years I had with her, often loses to my desire for privacy – to remain closed. I often feel a bond with my sister, even though she is no longer here. Milestones (e.g., graduations, birthdays, anniversaries) mark our bond and her absence. It is also possible that surviving siblings opt out of disclosure “when talking about the death result[s] in feelings of judgment” (Toller, 2005, p. 54). Because death is a topic we so rarely address in academia, the workplace, or among peers, it is possible that emergent adults often remain silent about their loss, rather than risk upsetting the comfort level of others by disclosure.

Tensions may take place at different levels of loss. While the focus of this research pertains to emergent adult surviving siblings who have lost their brother(s) or sister(s) to a drunk driver, it is possible the tensions found among elderly wives, whose husbands are battling dementia, may parallel those tensions experienced by surviving siblings. In their study, Baxter et al. (2002) state, “certain segments of ADRD patients’ lives became frozen in their memory” (p. 4); the memories of those we have lost are also frozen in time. The deceased sibling no longer ages or changes, but they remain in our memory, forever the age at which they died. For example, I experience a tension around the decision of whether to disclose each time. I desperately want to tell people the moment they ask me that “yes,” I do have a sister – or I did have a sister... Or I do have a sister, but she was killed – but then how much information about her death should I provide? This internal tension – the presence yet absence of a sibling – is something that surviving siblings negotiate differently, depending on the context.

It is also possible that the tensions experienced by surviving siblings are similar to those tensions grieving children experience. After losing Kari, I wanted to shrug all responsibilities. I desperately desired a break from the world, which was not possible. I felt pulled between my desire to be taken care of and my desire to be treated like an adult. This had a direct effect on my choice to discontinue my education, which I did – temporarily. This is also an example of change resulting from contradiction. I left school and moved to Tahoe to work at a ski resort. I see this now as an attempt to remain in a liminal state – neither aging nor reverting to childhood. I wanted everything to stop. This was a tension between certainty and uncertainty. By removing myself from the immediate situation, I was able to preserve some sort of certainty, avoiding the immense change of life without my sister. Bryant (2003) finds that children who have lost a parent, and whose parent has remarried, experience dialectical tensions in their stepfamilies surrounding openness-closedness (p. 167). This tension also exists for surviving siblings in renegotiating their identity after the loss of their sibling.

The different experiences of dialectical tensions among college-aged surviving siblings may vary considerably, as the experience of loss and death is unique. We create unique and individual relationships with different people, and we all have different interpersonal relationships with our siblings. With this in mind, my experience varies from the experience of others. As a result, sharing and exploring the experiences of other surviving siblings allows me to find overarching themes in sibling loss, as well as pull out individual stories and experiences of loss.

The collective dialectical tensions experienced by surviving siblings interpersonally, both in professional and educational environments, are important components in better understanding the support they need. By better understanding these tensions, we may be better able to provide the resources and support that surviving siblings need to succeed in college as well as in professional settings. In order to understand dialectical tensions, we must also explore the role that liminality and stigma play in this process, which I will discuss in the following section.

Liminality and Stigma in Dialectics

Liminality in loss and in dialectics is a theme, and I find that these two themes work together in this type of loss. My experience of losing Kari is an unwelcome rite of passage (Turner, 1982). From losing my identity, to existing in the liminal space, to coming to terms with my new identity, this rite of passage has shaped me. This process is still unfolding, and my identity is still in development, as there are many unanswered questions. According to Turner (1982), there are three phases in a rite of passage: separation, transition and incorporation (p. 24). Separation involves a detachment of the individual from his or her “previous social status”– the loss of Kari (p. 24). Transition is a liminal state, one in which a person passes “through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” – learning to live without Kari (p. 24). This transition represents the liminal space, where I reside as a surviving sibling. Finally, incorporation involves a person settling into, or accepting/embracing “their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society” – accepting, and living with, Kari’s permanent absence (p. 24).

This forced separation (the loss of Kari and my father) unwillingly threw me into a transitional state, a place of liminality. I move in, out and between the liminal space of love and loss, of missing and enjoying, and of happiness and sorrow. Each of these liminal spaces is marked with dialectical tension, as it is the contradictions in conversation that guide me through the liminal space. As I sink into this liminal space, I have often found myself feeling simultaneously grateful for my mother's survival, yet devastated at the loss of my sister and father.

I often feel trapped in my identity as a surviving sibling, living in the liminal. As I move through this rite of passage, I find that incorporation of my "new, relatively stable" position in society, exists in a liminal place (Turner, 1982, p. 24). This is not necessarily negative. For example, engaging in this research has helped me better understand the implications of grief (silence, liminality, identity negotiation) pertaining to the loss of Kari.

Before, the liminal space, or the "transition" as Turner refers to it, trapped me in an identity of uncertainty, where silence was my easiest form of communication. Now, I have found my voice in loss and I choose to move toward an understanding of grief amidst liminality and dialectical tensions, using these as a space for growth. "Liminality (living in the threshold)" has become my own way of living (Kelly, 2008, p. 335). I have found my new identity in a space between identities. Defining my role in this world is not as simple today as it was when Kari and my father were still here – not that it was ever simple. But now, I must re/co-construct my identity. My loss has been one of sudden, violent and unexpected circumstances. And I believe it is possible that my new

identity will continue to exist in the liminal, in a place of constant flux and never-ending identity negotiation and growth.

There is a relationship between liminality and dialectical tensions. For example, Turner (1969) highlights a lengthy list of “liminal situations,” which may include, among others, “equality/inequality,” “silence/speech,” “simplicity/complexity,” and “absence of status/status” (pp. 106-107). Each of these liminal states is also a tension we experience. While liminal spaces tend to be between two opposing identities, dialectical tensions unfold between many varying contradictions: some are directly opposed and others hang in suspension in a space that is neither here nor there. This is the relationship between dialectical tensions and liminality. Dialectical tensions do not need to be in direct opposition of each other, but instead occur simultaneously with *many* different contradictions. Whereas liminality suspends us *between* identities, it is the praxis of dialectical tensions that helps us negotiate our way from one identity to the next.

Liminality is a *process* by which an individual undergoes a change of identity. Dialectical tensions are the means by which we negotiate this process. Just as dialectical tensions help us re-create and co-construct our realities (and our “selves”) through communication, liminality also “pertains to the (re)creation of social identities” (Kofoed, 2008, p. 202). In this case, the before and after state of liminality are not pre-determined, but instead there are many possible outcomes due to the many possibilities inherent in “‘both-and’ and ‘neither-nor’” (Kofoed, 2008, p. 202). In partnership, dialectical tensions and liminality have the “potential to shed new light upon those subject positions which have been either normalized or muted” (Kofoed, 2008, p. 203). Liminal spaces are where

we might reside, but it is in the communicative acts of dialectical tensions – and praxis of those tensions – where we move through liminality.

My identity is one that is trapped between a life as a sister and the life of an only child, a life within a nuclear family and a life within a single-parent household, each of which is wrought with dialectical tensions. To be in a liminal state is to be betwixt and between – in a space between identities. Identity negotiation can be challenging after the loss of a sibling. It is possible surviving siblings find a space of comfort in the liminal, in a space between identities. A surviving sibling's new identity may continue to exist in the liminal; in a place of constant flux and never-ending identity negotiation, if he or she does not navigate the dialectical tensions in a productive process. From losing my identity, to existing in the liminal space, to coming to terms with my new identity, the loss of Kari has shaped me – from my interpersonal relationships to my academic pursuits (Turner, 1982). This process is still unfolding, and my identity is fluid. I am a surviving sibling, and I am an invisible sister, a silent, surviving sister, held in a liminal space. Though often unrecognized by others, stigma marks my loss. Losing a sister to a drunk driver sounds awful enough, but it also makes me – and other surviving siblings – different. It is possible we represent a reality many do not want to face.

Amidst loss and grief, it is common to both lose track of identity, and to feel new identity taking shape as we make sense of our new place in the world without our loved one. In her study about parents who have suffered the loss of a child, Hastings (2000) identifies a “fractured identity of the bereaved parent” (p. 354) in which parents renegotiate their new identity. “The ‘new self’ that emerges is one that many people can

help to construct” (p. 356). Some siblings expressed frustration with the fractured identity they experience. Again, this reinforces the importance of communication during times of loss. The ways in which we communicate our loss, and the ways in which others reinforce our loss, will contribute in paving the way to a new identity – a new identity that takes shape around the void left by our losses.

Furthering the liminal state of grief, the loss of a loved one may give way to mourning a previous identity as a new identity begins to take shape. Hastings (2000) finds that “in addition to mourning the loss of the child, the parent may also grieve the loss of her or his own identity” (p. 355). The same may be said for surviving siblings. Hastings (2000) discusses identity management among parents who have lost a child. Many of the issues addressed by Hastings may be similar to those faced by surviving siblings. Hastings (2000) discusses the constant self-questioning: “if your only child dies, are you still a mother” (p. 352)? Siblings may ask that same question: “if my sibling dies, am I still that person’s brother or sister?” Each sibling I spoke with answers a vehement “yes.” However, the answer that comes out each time varies and is contextual. While he or she is still a sibling, he or she will selectively disclose information regarding this identity. Our reality is reinforced by our siblings, as is our identity. Emergent adult surviving siblings feel the loss of their identity as well. When we understand ourselves as someone’s sibling, and that sibling dies, we must renegotiate our identity, which has taken years to create; this is a long and difficult process.

Communication in grief and in identity negotiation is important. “Conversation is the primary vehicle through which identity is constructed, contested, and negotiated,”

then “identity becomes the product of the social process” (Hastings, 2000, p. 357).

Identity negotiation involves redefining one’s role in society after a large portion of how we identify ourselves is permanently altered. For example, a parent identifies him/herself, among other things, as a parent, just as a sibling identifies him/herself as a brother or sister. When the other defining part of that equation is taken away, not only does the survivor have to work through her/his grief, but he/she also needs to redefine her/his role in the world.

Identity management is an important concern – one of many – in grief communication, as we co-create and co-construct our identities in relation to societal norms and to those around us. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), “a person knows himself or herself only by knowing how others know him or her ... the self is substantiated in interaction; it comes into being and is sustained ... through interpersonal contact and communication with others” (p. 157). If death is a taboo topic, then it is taboo to talk about loss, and therefore, our evolving identity remains in a liminal space where we are not able to confront our loss. Hastings (2000) found that, “rules restricting self-disclosures are shared by bereaved parents, thus forming part of the basis for a shared cultural identity...it is through self-disclosure of information and personal narratives that much identity work gets done” (p. 357). This is important in terms of loss; surviving siblings also practice specific rules pertaining to self-disclosure. Hastings (2000) finds that bereaved parents have a fear of disclosing their loss, as they do not want to burden those around them (p. 368). Again, this very concern applies to surviving siblings. In an age group that rarely discusses loss and death, this prevents self-

disclosure. However, the liminal state also provides a space for growth, for positive change to occur. For example, a sibling who loses his or her brother or sister to a drunk driver may be less likely to engage in risky behaviors based on this experience. I spoke with a surviving sibling who now volunteers with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), and another who began a scholarship in her brother's name to support a good cause and to honor his memory. Tensions propel surviving siblings through liminal spaces, where positive or negative changes unfold, depending on the communication and the co-construction of those dialectical tensions. Stigma also indicates whether negative or positive changes occur out of a surviving sibling's experience of liminality and dialectical tensions.

There is a link between dialectical tensions and sibling loss during college, and many of those tensions surround stigma of disclosure. "Disclosing private and risky information about self is a dialectical phenomenon in which all the assumptions of a dialectical perspective apply: contradiction, change, praxis, and totality" (Dindia, 1998, p. 105). According to Dindia (1998), stigmatized identities may include: "physical disability, membership in some stigmatized group, character defects that are manifested by some discrediting event in the person's past or present, and disease" (p. 83). Stigma surrounds "disclosure of homosexuality, HIV-positive status, AIDS, sexual abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness, epilepsy...occupational stigmatization (e.g., low-status occupations such as prostitutes...animal experimenters)" (Dindia, 1998, p. 83). I further assert that losing a sibling to a drunk driver, during emerging adulthood (a critical time when identity is evolving), leads to a stigmatized identity. According to Arnett

(2000), emergent adults tend to engage in risk behaviors more so than adolescents or adults – this includes alcohol use (pp. 474-475). That sibling is now associated with a group that crosses the boundaries of societal norms: dealing with death and loss at a young age, and loss associated with drinking and driving, a controversial issue in our society.

Disclosure is difficult, questionable, and often marked by stigma, which works to perpetuate a liminal state. “Self-disclosure of private and risky information involves a contradiction of whether to reveal or conceal” (Dindia, 1998, p. 105). Disclosing the loss of a sibling during college is problematic. This sets the surviving sibling apart from his or her peers and leads to a dialectic of “stigma disclosure” (Dindia, 1998, p. 104). When a sibling is killed by a drunk driver, it not only sets the sibling apart from his or her peers, but it also directly contradicts the behaviors in which so many of the sibling’s peers are – or have – engaged.

The stigma attached to death and loss can be overwhelming and can lead to a feeling of otherness. This is a tension I know well. In a book detailing her experience as a hospice volunteer, Foster (2007) touches on the stigma that surrounds death, noting that those we recognize as dying are “inherently different from us” (p. 90). I felt different from and judged by my peer group, and other surviving siblings experience this as well.

A surviving sibling’s story brings an element of sadness to the peer group, which leads to stigmatization and possible self-censoring. “The dialectical contradiction between the need to reveal and the need to conceal is not limited to stigma disclosure, but is generalizable to self-disclosure of all private and risky information about the self”

(Dindia, 1998, p. 104). Self-censoring due to stigmatization is a theme that surfaced in this research; I will discuss this issue in greater detail in Chapter 4. Death is steeped in stigma, which deepens the silence. Stigma plays a role in the dialectical tensions that surviving siblings experience. It is the negotiation of dialectical tensions that helps surviving siblings navigate the liminal space; however, it is stigma that may impact the ways in which dialectical tensions are navigated. Narrative, which I will discuss in the following section, also serves an important role in grief communication.

Narrative in Communicating Loss

Communication plays an important role in loss and is an important component in grief negotiation. Storytelling and personal narratives are necessary functions in the grief process. Narrative provides “both the joy-filled freedom of expression and a confirmation” (Madison, 2005, p. 56). Narrative, a form of communication, allows for freedom where participants may name and reflect on “their fears and desires” (Madison, 2005, p. 56). According Bosticco and Thompson (2005), “communication serves as a central function in grieving” (p. 274). However, grief and death seem to be two large categories within our society from which we shy away. In their exploration of grief in the family system, Bosticco and Thompson (2005) discuss two significant losses a child may experience in his or her lifetime. That is the death of a parent or the death of a sibling (p. 262). While this research is helpful in exploring sibling loss, it does not necessarily address the experience of emergent adult surviving siblings, as Bosticco and Thompson (2005) are referring to adolescents. It is possible, even likely, that the experience of loss may vary greatly, depending on the age of the surviving sibling.

Support groups play an important role in the healing process, which makes sense from a social construction perspective. Support groups provide a space for personal narratives, to disclose our stories. It is these stories that “enable people to make their experiences intelligible to each other” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 180). The narrative nature of support groups may allow for surviving siblings to make sense of the dialectical tensions they experience, and this space may allow for communication to occur, inviting surviving siblings to find healthy ways to negotiate these tensions – both interpersonally and across educational contexts. Toller (2005) found that support groups help parents understand “that they will never ‘get over it’ and that healing involves learning to integrate their memories of the child into their present lives” (p. 55). When my sister and my father died, I did not attend support group sessions; such groups did not exist for me. As a 20-year-old college student, I was either too old or too young for the existing groups, which caused a sense of isolation and loneliness. Instead, I attended grief groups with parents who recently lost a child. I attended these meetings as a guest speaker, to talk with parents about what it is like as the only surviving child. I talked with them about the pain and abandonment and the invisibility and loneliness the surviving child may experience. Communication has served as an integral role in my own healing and understanding. As I mentioned in chapter one, I attended a sibling loss support group, for the first time, nine years after the loss of my sister and father. While there were issues signing up for this group, the experience of attending this group in itself was tremendously beneficial. For the first time, I was able to share my story with a group of people who also shared an understanding of sibling loss.

This loss, years later, has contributed to my desire to pursue scholarly work and to foster a space for change so surviving siblings in emergent adulthood have a place and a voice in this culture. The importance of support groups is further asserted by Cluck and Cline (1986), who state that family and friends perpetuate the “conspiracy of silence,” and professionals “judge grief to be pathological” (p. 311). As a result, it is within the space of grief groups where people facing similar types of loss can truly relate to one another. This includes surviving siblings.

Grief groups also provide a valuable and protected space for the grieving to tell stories and to share experiences of their loss. As a guest speaker in grief groups, I had the opportunity to listen to personal narratives of mothers and fathers who lost their children. These narratives and stories allowed for these parents to create meaning and understanding of their loss and pain. In particular, a participant in this study articulated the relief she felt when she had the chance to participate in a support group – crying was allowed, as was story telling through personal narratives. This was tremendously healing. Scholars like Balas (2005) also view narratives and storytelling as important conveyors of “culture, imagination, and social norms” (p. 184). Balas (2005) finds that “we learn about our larger world through narrative, and we are shaped by the stories of our culture ... stories work not only to articulate grief and loss, but also to facilitate healing and closure” (pp. 184-185). By communicating about loss, we can begin to make sense of the complex and tangled emotions we experience. Neimeyer, et al. (2008) suggest a different grieving process among college students between natural versus violent death (p. 31). They find that “college students who are grieving violent deaths”

need assistance in “searching for significance and meaning in the loss,” as making meaning in loss tends to be a beneficial component of the grieving process (p. 32). While there is no one “formula” or “fix” for healing, communication does play an important role in coping with grief and death. According to Balas (2005), storytelling has the “power to produce heightened feelings of wellbeing, transformations of identity, and a personal sense of social connection” (p. 185). With this in mind, communicating loss may be the most therapeutic method for healing. However, it is possible that emergent adult surviving siblings are not always comfortable communicating loss; this is a function of dialectical tensions that guide them away from disclosure.

After a traumatic loss, communication is important. Instead, we reinforce silence and invisibility; we discourage talking about the loss. For example, Shuler’s (2007) autoethnographic research, which pertains to emotional labor as a volunteer in a domestic violence shelter, discusses a painful experience of loss. Shuler (2007) begins what seems like a study about her experience as a volunteer. But toward the end of her work, she describes a loss she, and the entire community, sustains. Her close friend and colleague, Julie, is tragically killed in a car accident, after a cinder block is thrown onto her car by someone on a freeway overpass. What stands out about this section of her research is the intense emotional rollercoaster she encounters as she negotiates her grief. Shuler explains the tragic news as awakening “to a new reality” (p. 274). This “new reality,” as described by Shuler (2007), conveys the feelings surviving siblings may experience. Their new reality entails a life without their sibling, the person with whom they are

supposed to grow old. This further perpetuates the state of liminality surviving siblings experience, as well as the constant interplay of multivocal tensions.

In addition to the new reality and liminal existence surviving siblings experience, death associated with drunk driving opens up a slough of legal issues. Responsibilities for emerging adult surviving siblings include multiple deadlines in school and/or work, as well as court trials, graphic images, and accident reports. Shuler (2007) provides a brief account of the murder trial that occurs after the loss of her close friend; she discusses the pain of this loss felt throughout the university where she teaches. In discussing the pain associated with the loss of her friend and colleague, Shuler (2007) is disappointed to hear “how many of [her] friends did not share their sense of loss with their students” (p. 275). She asks the question, “Why do many of us conform to professional dictates of emotional labor so well that we can’t be human beings to our students?” (p. 275). This behavior modeling conveys a powerful message: Don’t communicate about death and loss, as there is an appropriate time and place, and it is not here. At a certain point, it may be beneficial to both professors and to their students, to supervisors and to their employees, to talk about loss – to acknowledge the pain, to break the socially taboo topic of death out into the open, to lead by example, to show students that is okay to talk about death – that it is okay to hurt, to be human.

While work specific to sibling loss is limited, autoethnographic research has contributed valuable insight to this field. Goodall (2004) defines autoethnography as “a cross-disciplinary communication project aimed at re-establishing the centrality of personal experience and identity in the social construction of knowledge” (p. 187).

Autoethnography blends research and the first-person perspective to illuminate lived experience, which draws the reader into the experience as if s/he were living it. I will discuss autoethnography in further detail in chapter three. Work to date that incorporates autoethnography into sudden sibling loss effectively conveys the visceral, ephemeral siblinghood that surviving siblings experience. In particular, Ellis (1993) paints a vivid picture of her experience of sudden sibling loss through autoethnography. After losing her brother in a plane crash, Ellis (1993) discusses the incredible pain she experiences in receiving the news, processing the grief, and in interacting with others. Ellis (1993) discusses a conversation with her mother, who is understandably upset at the loss of her son; she tells her mother that she is also upset, and her mother replies, “A mother’s pain is worse, the worst there is” (p. 218). This reinforces the issue that siblings “rarely feel they have the right to grieve beyond a few weeks”; they are “the forgotten bereaved” (Wray, 2003, p. 22). This places the weight of the loss on the surviving sibling, also challenging the academic/professional demands and social expectations required of college and professional life.

It can be difficult, if not impossible, to find the right words to convey the void left by a deceased sibling. Perhaps language also has a bearing in navigating dialectical tensions and liminality. How does one discuss a significant loss if he/she is at a loss of words to do so? Lindemann (2004) recounts his experience of loss and grief and the intense emotions he experiences in coping with the sudden loss of his brother. Lindemann (2004) portrays a vivid image of the intense emotion that accompanies loss: “It’s not enough to say everything became less important. It’s not enough to say that

there is no word for grief that can be humanly uttered and still embody that concavity of loss” (p. 67). Through performative writing and autoethnography, Lindemann is better able to draw the reader into his experience of loss. The void a surviving sibling feels is too immense for words; Lindemann’s (2004) work provides insight into the deep and complex web of emotions associated with such a loss. Many of the experiences conveyed by Lindemann (2004) are dialectic, as he works to negotiate his personal experience of sudden sibling loss. The way in which Lindemann (2004) lost his brother – suddenly – has bearing over his grief process.

Similarly, *how* we lose our sibling will cause variance in our experience of grief, just as the way a parent loses his/her child will cause her/him to experience grief differently. “Cause of death, age of child at the time of death, religious orientation before the loss, personality factors, differing perspectives on the role of talk in the recovery process, and differing strategies for coping with grief” all lead to different experiences on behalf of bereaved parents (Hastings, 2000, p. 353). Whether the surviving person is a sibling, a daughter/son, a cousin, a friend or a parent – the way in which we grieve depends on the loss we experience.

The opportunity for communication, personal narrative, and storytelling in the grief process is a powerful tool for surviving siblings. In their research pertaining to the loss of a life partner, Capps and Bonanno (2000) also discuss the importance of narrative in negotiating grief. Because “individuals who have experienced the death of a partner repeatedly revisit this occurrence and associated circumstances over the course of their lives,” narrative is “among the most pervasive and powerful human resources for

recalling and reconstructing personal experiences in both private and public domains” (Capps & Bonanno, 2000, p. 3). As shown among families dealing with grief, and now in conjugal loss, it is quite possible that narrative and storytelling is also a component of healing among surviving siblings.

While the aforementioned studies influence this research, future work must address siblings who lose their brother(s) and/or sister(s) to a drunk driver, particularly during emergent adulthood, which is a critical age to experience any type of loss. This lack of research leaves a critical gap in the field of communication. As a result, the following research questions will guide my study:

RQ1: How are dialectical tensions experienced by emergent adult surviving siblings who have suffered the loss of their brother(s) or sister(s) to a drunk driver?

RQ2: How do surviving siblings negotiate these dialectical tensions across instructional contexts?

RQ3: How do surviving siblings negotiate these dialectical tensions across professional contexts?

Conclusion

Just yesterday, a close friend called me to chat and catch up. By accident, she also told me her brother received a DUI. I heard the hesitancy in her voice as she told me; it just slipped out in our conversation, and it was too late for her to turn back. My immediate reaction was to be supportive, to let her know she could share these things with me, and I will always listen with an open heart. My afterthought, though, is one of

disappointment. I feel an immediate pull between openness and closedness. I understand her reluctance in telling me, but I also hear her making excuses for her brother's behavior, which is disconcerting for me. But rather than voice this concern, I chose to remain silent. This is an example of the primary tension – closedness – outweighing the secondary tension – openness. Had the circumstances been different – had she engaged in this behavior, or completely excused the behavior of her brother, the tension surrounding openness (or even assertiveness) may have emerged as primary rather than secondary to closed.

It is through the emergent conversations with other surviving siblings that I may begin to discover dialectical tensions experienced on an individual, dyadic level, as well as within society as a whole. As Baxter (2004) stresses, theory development may be gradual, but “it’s actually quite unpredictable” (p. 190). Baxter (2004) maintains that “theory growing takes place in utterances between scholars, not in the actions of autonomous scholars” (p. 190). I hope to begin this conversation among and between scholars and surviving siblings.

In the Chapter 3, the following chapter, I will discuss the methods and procedures of this study. I will further define narrative interviewing and autoethnography, the primary methods used in this research, as well as discuss the procedural steps I took in recruiting and interviewing participants.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Ten years ago and in the immediate years following the death of my sister, I did not talk about my loss in educational contexts – though it had tremendous bearing over my performance. I felt guilty, as if the mood crashed down all around me when I brought up this depressing topic. At the time, I told myself, *it has been one year (or two years or three years or four years) ... I should be over this and moving on already ... people don't need to know about my story, nor do they care ... and why should they? It's just an excuse.* Today, I rarely discuss her death: *It has been too long. People will think I feel sorry for myself. It really has no bearing over me, and who I am. No one cares ... why should they?* But the truth is, this is the one thing in my life that has most shaped me, defined my identity. I have concerns associated with this work, but I think that is only natural. Like Ellis (1995), I worry that by engaging in this work, my colleagues will view it as unimportant in communication. I worry that they will see this demographic as too small a group to really worry about – that there are much larger issues awaiting discovery. But, this is the largest issue in my world, and I now know there are many individuals who share this reality.

For the first time, I embark on this journey, and write about loss. The methodologies I choose to pursue are logical for my purpose and goals. I cannot enter this study and leave my experiences at the door, as I believe my experience is of value in this work. The aforementioned excuses I use – even today – are just that: Excuses. There is a dearth of work within the field of communication regarding this phenomenon. My hope is that this work will serve all surviving siblings who have lost a brother or

sister to a drunk driver. I cannot speak for an entire community, but I can help to begin that conversation.

In an exploration of the dialectical tensions and liminal spaces experienced by emergent adult surviving siblings who have lost their sibling(s) to drunk drivers, I employed the method that best answered my research questions: Narrative interviewing. This method was navigated through my methodology: Autoethnography.

Autoethnography and narrative interviewing functioned together to illuminate how college-aged surviving siblings, who lost their sibling(s) to a drunk driver, experience dialectical tensions and how they negotiate these tensions across instructional and professional contexts. These methods, autoethnography and narrative interviewing, are intertwined in this study. These are two methods that researchers may approach individually, but in this study, they are not mutually exclusive methods. Instead, they function together to build meaning throughout this process. Narrative interviewing is an extension of both grief communication and dialectical tensions, and has served as a valuable method in previous work (e.g., Toller & Braithwaite, 2009; Toller, 2005; Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, & Olson, 2002). Furthermore, autoethnography is an extension of work concerning grief communication (e.g., Ellis, 1995, 1993; Lindemann, 2004; Shuler, 2007). What sets this particular study apart is the collaborative nature of narrative interviewing and autoethnography, and how these two methods helped in exploring sibling loss associated with drunk driving.

I have separated this section into two primary categories: Methodology and Procedures. In the Methodology section, I will explore autoethnography, reflexivity and

narrative interviewing in further detail. In the Procedures section, I will discuss interview protocol, sample, interview coding and analysis.

Methodology

Autoethnography and reflexivity. Autoethnography is of value to this research due to my close relationship with the topic and my firsthand experience of the tensions associated with sibling loss in college. The experiences I discuss in Chapter 1 illuminate the experiences that researchers, without this intimate familiarity with loss, may not understand. By pulling the reader into this topic, he/she may gain a clearer understanding of what it means to lose a sibling to a drunk driver during emerging adulthood and how this experience significantly impacts our lives: interpersonal relationships, course work, professional work, and relationships between the surviving sibling and society.

Autoethnographic analysis asks that the researcher turn inward and reflect on his or her personal experiences to explain particular phenomena in her/his research – in this case, grief communication. In essence, the researcher is, in his or herself, the research instrument. The researcher turns inward to her/himself to reflect and analyze a lived experience. In addition, the researcher, with her/his experience, turns outward to reflect and analyze her/his data. According to Angrosino (2007), autoethnography is a narrative of the self (p. 80). Furthermore, this type of research is “characterized by dramatic recall, strong metaphors, vivid characters, unusual phrasings, and the holding back of interpretation so as to invite the reader to relive the emotions experienced by the author” (Angrosino, 2007, p. 80). Through autoethnography, I invite readers to *feel* the visceral stab of losing a sibling, to *experience* communicating loss and to *hear* the voices of

others concerning that loss. The reader may experience – through this autoethnography – the dialectical tensions associated with sibling loss, as well as the liminal spaces in which surviving siblings reside. This allows for readers to better understand the experiences of the grieving as members of society, as college students, as professionals and as constituents in interpersonal relationships.

My experience with sibling loss and drunk driving has defined me, has shaped me into the person I am today. It is not possible to remove my personal attachment to this particular topic, nor would it be ethically sound for me to attempt a personal detachment in this study. As a result, I embrace autoethnography as a way to disclose my positionality, as a way for my voice to emerge. This provides an outlet for my own voice, self-reflexivity and positionality. Goodall (2004) finds that we “write or perform personal narratives as ways of explaining things, and our explanations reunite what we call the literature in a field or on a subject with the actual telling of a life story” (p. 184). Autoethnography functions as a means for me to explore and contribute my own experience with dialectical tensions and sibling loss in college.

My experience is a valuable addition to this study. “Descriptions of the outward world come from deep inside us. Because each of us has been shaped and informed by different deeply personal experiences, our descriptions of the same scene are likely to be as distinctive as they are personal” (Goodall, 2000, p. 95). My vision of the world around me, my reality, has been – and will continue to be – informed by my loss. To remove my experience from this study will only ignore my preexisting positionality, and how it inevitably influences my analysis.

Reflexivity serves as an important function in positionality, as well as in this study. Reflexivity requires that I assess my own role as a researcher (as well as any findings or conclusions that I draw based on the data) with a critical mind (Flick, 2007, p. 102). Rather than pretend that I do not hold a personal commitment or a very intimate stake in my findings, I instead own this fact from start to finish. Reflexivity helps in holding me accountable for my findings, in ensuring I “advocate ... an argument based on ... [my] ... commitment and ... experience and claiming it as ... [my] ... own, rather than trying to force a connection between ... [my] ... argument and the data” (Madison, 2005, p. 138). This involved accuracy in data collection and in reflection. While autoethnography is an important component here, I also looked to my participants to fill in the gaps, to help me understand their experience.

Autoethnography nurtures reflexivity in that it challenges me to openly question my findings, my certainty, and my research throughout the entire process from start to finish. In fact, this method started engaging findings before the project began and will continue to gain momentum well beyond its immediate completion. This work represents the beginning of a much larger project.

Autoethnographic research conveys the real and communicative experiences felt by those who experience them, rather than those conveyed by a third party.

Autoethnography “matters deeply in the lives of others who find themselves portrayed in texts not of their own making” (Neumann, 1996, p. 191). For example, Ellis’s (1995) narrative of “chronic illness and loss” provides a glimpse into the lived experience of grief (p. 3). Ellis (1995) writes from “the inside, about the bigger picture of the process

of loss” (p. 304). While many people find Ellis’s (1995) work to be uncomfortably emotional and raw, this emphasizes the importance of this type of work. Death and loss are not easy topics. Due to the complex and individual nature of loss, individual stories are critical components that fit within the larger construct of the communication field.

Scholars like Tillmann-Healy (1995), Shuler (2007), Lindemann (2004) and Ellis (1995, 1993) have shown that autoethnography can bring readers into an experience at a very intimate level. This is not to discount more traditional types of research, but to illuminate the beneficial properties autoethnography lends to this particular study.

Autoethnography lent itself to the quality of the interviews I conducted. Due to my experience with sibling loss – a sensitive topic – I was prepared to discuss very real issues associated with communication and sibling loss. Due to my previous experience within the culture of surviving siblings – particularly surviving siblings whose brother(s) and/or sister(s) were killed by drunk drivers – I had the ability to bring attention to this topic and to give a voice to other surviving siblings through the method of narrative interviews.

Interviews. This study is also informed by narrative interviewing. This method allowed me to better understand the experiences of college-aged surviving siblings as well as learn more about their perspectives through the stories, accounts, and explanations they provided (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). My own experience as a surviving sibling is instrumental in my ability to speak with others about their loss, particularly concerning such a sensitive topic. I did not expect to employ narrative

interviewing as a separate method unto itself but rather as a method that works in partnership with autoethnography.

I tried to establish my credibility with participants by disclosing my own experience with loss as well as my own positionality in this study. It is my belief that disclosure is the most ethical and effective way to establish rapport with study participants. The interview questions I used (see Appendix A) evolved out of my own understanding of dialectical tensions and grief and were formulated as a way to “understand the [participant’s] experience and perspective” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Through narrative interviews, I attempted to “capture and explicate” the different stories of loss and dialectical tensions experienced by emerging adult surviving siblings who have suffered their loss to a drunk driver (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179). Narrative interviews seek “nuanced accounts of different aspects of the interviewee’s life world” (Kvale, 2007, p. 12). In-depth, narrative interviews provided a space for participants to share their experiences of communication surrounding loss.

I interviewed seven individuals, all females (by coincidence), who were emerging adults when they lost their siblings to drunk drivers. Originally, I had hoped to interview surviving siblings who were in college at the time of their loss, but it was difficult to recruit these individuals. Once I opened this project up to those who were of emergent adult age, I received additional responses. Even so, the number of participants who responded to my research was on the lower end of the number I originally expected. However, this number of participants was appropriate for this study, as “it is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than more

superficially with many of them” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17). Working with too large a group on this particular topic may have pulled me from the detail and sensitivity required. This study offers a glimpse into the complicated culture of sibling loss, allowing others an understanding of the experiences that ensue following such a traumatic experience.

The narrative interview did have its limitations in this study. The nature of the narrative interview is vulnerable to subjective interpretation on behalf of the researcher. I am close to the subject matter due to my own experience with the topic. As a result, I looked to my recorded interviews and coded data to ensure I engaged in reflexive practice in interpreting participant responses. Through this process of self-reflexivity, I interpreted the interviews. Autoethnography served as a space to openly engage in a reflexive process that explored mine and other’s experiences with loss. This topic involved sensitive subject matter; there was a risk of participants sharing partial information as self-protection (self-censoring), and there was a risk in participants becoming upset in the process. As I outline in my IRB protocol, participants were free to opt out of the interviews at any time – before or during the interview process – though no one did. I also provided contact information to helpful resources like Hospice and MADD for participants to seek out assistance should they so choose. Finally, through narrative interviewing, I opened up the conversation about this specific type of loss.

To facilitate and foster participant comfort levels, and to encourage honest responses to interview questions, I was honest and transparent with my participants, as “the interviewer is always a vital part of the narrative” (Ellis, 2004, p. 61). Because we co-construct the interview process, the interpersonal nature of these interviews made it

possible to foster a space where “knowledge [was] constructed in the inter-action between two people” – the interviewee and the interviewer (Kvale, 2007, p. 13). Furthermore, the sensitivity of the researcher will result in different findings, depending on the ways in which the researcher asks questions and interprets the results. This further lent to my position as a researcher in this topic, as I shared this loss with the participants. This process involved self-disclosure in order to foster an environment of trust, and to establish rapport (Ellis, 2004, p. 62). This also assisted in the interview process; if participants understood my reasoning for being involved in such a study, they tended to feel more comfortable, and therefore more inclined to respond to interview questions honestly and openly.

Interviews and autoethnography as collaborative. While individuals likely experienced a number of dialectical tensions, overarching patterns did occur. Through these patterns, we can begin to better understand the grief process in sibling loss associated with drunk driving, as well as how surviving siblings can access the support they need across educational and professional contexts. Bosticco and Thompson (2005) find there is an issue in gaining access to the community of the bereaved due to the sensitive nature of the topic, and I found this to be very true. As a member of this community, I believed I would gain easier – not easy – access to this community. I did gain access, though it was still a challenge, in part due to the sensitive nature of the topic in question. These methods work together in shaping the research process. Autoethnography and narrative interviewing work together to uncover these areas, and more.

Procedures

Sample and recruitment. I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance to conduct narrative interviews with surviving siblings. I interviewed seven emergent adults whose siblings were killed by drunk drivers. I worked with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) to recruit participants. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, and to the small number of possible participants within the immediate geographic area, it became necessary to interview participants via telephone. My recruitment through MADD took three forms: 1) posting on MADD's forum, 2) announcing via MADD's Facebook page, and 3) publishing an article in the MADD Victim Advocate Newsletter, which was circulated to MADD chapters throughout the country.

I informed MADD about my research project; the organization was supportive of this work. MADD provides support for drunk driving survivors and victims. MADD shared my research within the organization, sparking interest among other surviving siblings – among MADD employees, volunteers and advocates.

This collaborative research effort required the participation of other surviving siblings who provided insight into the communication patterns and dialectical tensions they have encountered, allowing for patterns and multiple stories to emerge.

Sampling. I invited emergent adult surviving siblings who lost their brother(s) or sister(s) to drunk drivers to participate in individual interviews. Each interview lasted one to two-and-a-half hours in length, depending on the circumstances. Participants varied in college and professional backgrounds and age. All participants in this study were female.

I first corresponded with each interested participant via email to answer any questions he or she had and to provide more information about the study. This way, potential participants had the opportunity to talk with me before deciding whether to participate. I ended up conducting all but one interview via telephone, as most participants were located outside of California. Each interview was audio recorded. I briefed participants prior to the interview and prior to gathering their signed consent as to the scope and goals of this study. I also debriefed participants at the end of each interview as to any findings and who to contact should they have additional information to provide or any questions.

Safety superseded all other factors of this study; I practiced confidentiality procedures including pseudonyms for participants. I provided informed consent both in hard copy (via US mail) as well as electronically (well before the interview took place). Sibling loss is a painful topic, and I made every effort to protect privacy as well as to adhere to ethical standards throughout this process.

I also debriefed participants as to who they could contact if they needed additional information, where they could go for future resources (e.g., MADD, hospice, counseling services), how they could maintain contact with me and what they might expect in terms of next steps with this research project. I also plan to share my findings with those participants that expressed an interest in the outcomes of this project. Transparency regarding my findings and observations in this research is important. By sharing my findings with participants, they are free to expand on certain areas or to even correct possible misunderstandings.

Interviews provided a space to create and co-construct knowledge through the “inter-action between two people” (Kvale, 2007, p. 13). Because the interviewee and interviewer “act in relation to each other and reciprocally influence each other,” it is important participants are a part of the findings (Kvale, 2007, p. 14). This space made it possible for surviving siblings to find their voices and to collectively provide insight into this culture. I worked to capture the experiences of surviving siblings to ensure accuracy in the dialectical tensions and communication patterns that surround this type of loss.

Data analysis. Through narrative interviews, participants recounted specific instances, or short stories, as well as life stories or “life histories” that provided insight into their communicative experiences (Kvale, 2007, p. 74). I then transcribed the interviews. Based on the transcriptions, I tried to find emergent patterns, from which I created categories for coding. I followed Madison’s (2005) recommendation in data analysis (pp. 36-39). Through coding, I grouped “together themes and categories that ... have accumulated” in the interview process (Madison, 2005, p. 36). I made every effort to maintain detailed logs and transcripts of the interviews, as “the more specific and thematic” the interview is, “the less complicated it will be to group and order” the data (Madison, 2005, p. 37). This is where recording my interviews greatly assisted in the coding process.

Recording the interviews for coding surfaced certain patterns and experiences of communication and dialectical tensions among surviving siblings. I coded for emergent dialectical tensions (made up of contradictions), as well as *how* participants negotiated those tensions. My hope is that this research helps those in the communication field, and

those who are working through their own loss, understand the dialectical tensions enmeshed in this particular type of grief, and the liminal spaces where dialectical tensions unfold.

Autoethnography and narrative interviews functioned together, in a collaborative manner, to call out patterns and experiences in dialectical tensions among surviving siblings. Ellis (1993) states that “True stories such as these join ethnographic and fictional writing, the personal and the social, autobiographical and sociological understanding, and literature and social science” (p. 724). I have yet to come across studies of dialectical tensions and sudden sibling loss associated with drinking and driving in the field of communication. By joining the stories and accounts of surviving siblings through narrative interviews and autoethnography, I surfaced new understandings about dialectical tensions and liminality in communicating loss. I was also able to identify the ways in which these dialectical tensions and liminality took shape across instructional and professional contexts.

Interview protocol. Honesty and transparency were – and still are – important, as this is a sensitive topic that requires the participants’ trust. As a result, it was important for me to build rapport with participants in this study. To build rapport with my participants, I began with “clarity of purpose” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 189). I shared with participants my purpose and reasons for conducting this study, and I shared my own personal vested interest in this topic by disclosing my identity. “Interviewer self-disclosures are one way to engage the participant’s interest and pave the way for a meaningful interview” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 190). Through disclosure,

participants understood that their participation *does* matter, that there is very little research about this particular topic, and that they may help other surviving siblings who struggle with similar tensions.

My interview questions followed the Patton Model (Madison, 2005, p. 27). Madison (2005) discusses her success in using this model throughout the years, and I find this particular model to also be useful in my interview design. This model functions to illuminate the lived experiences of participants. The Patton Model asks six types of questions: “Behavior or Experience Questions,” “Opinion or Value Questions,” “Feeling Questions,” “Knowledge Questions,” “Sensory Questions,” and “Background/Demographic Questions” (Madison, 2005, pp. 27-28). I will address each question type in further detail.

Behavior and experience questions surround issues of “concrete human action, conduct, or ways of ‘doing’” (Madison, 2005, p. 27). I asked behavior and experience questions like: What did you do after the accident, both long term and short term? For example, did you move back home? Did you take time off of school/work or continue straight on through? This invited participants to reflect on the overall experience of their loss, and what they did afterward.

Opinion and value questions “address a conviction, judgment, belief, or particular persuasion towards a phenomenon” (Madison, 2005, p. 27). Opinion and value questions I asked included: How did your loss affect your relationship with your peers or colleagues? With your professors? With your employers? Why do you believe your relationship was affected in this way?

Feeling questions surface participants' "emotions, sentiments, and passions" toward a particular phenomenon (Madison, 2005, p. 27). One such question I asked was: Were there any internal conflicts you experienced in terms of your relationships with your peers (e.g., desire to fit in yet unable to relax and feel comfortable)?

Knowledge questions explored "the range of information and learning a participant holds about a phenomenon, as well as where this knowledge comes from and how it is attained" (Madison, 2005, p. 28). I asked knowledge questions like: How has this loss affected your interpersonal communication with others?

Sensory questions ask participants about their "senses and human sensation" (Madison, 2005, p. 28). Sensory questions I asked participants include: How do you physically feel when you discuss the accident? How does your body respond?

Background and demographic questions ask participants for "concrete and practical information concerning the distribution, location, and size of populations" (Madison, 2005, p. 28). Demographic questions are important in this study, as each participant's age, income, family, faith, culture, race, gender (and more), affect dialectical tensions and how s/he negotiates those tensions. An example of a demographic question I asked is: Can you tell me about your family and background?

In analyzing this data, I relied on Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) three areas of analysis: "data management, data reduction, and conceptual development" (p. 211). Data management required that I maintain control of my data collection through organization. I transcribed interviews as I collected them, and made note of patterns as I saw them emerge (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 211). Through coding, I was able to sort through the

patterns that pertained to this particular study. Because it was not possible to utilize every bit of data, I needed to reduce the data down to a manageable size through codes that pertained to “those parts of the material that count toward” my claims (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 211). Finally, conceptual development allowed me to pull forth the themes and concepts that are not only “informed by theory but also grounded in” communication studies – in particular, dialectical theory as it relates to loss (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 211).

Data collection took place from start to finish of this study. Language and use of words can be challenging in capturing the experiences of others. As a result, I looked to my participants to fill in the blanks where there were no obvious words. Through this collective process, I combined the voices of my participants with my own to illuminate and explore relevant themes that help in understanding the experiences of surviving siblings.

Interviewee biographies. I interviewed seven female participants in this study. In what follows, I share biographical information about each participant. I have changed all names and identifying information. I did choose to include information surrounding academics and/or employment as well as the age of their siblings who passed away and when those siblings passed away. I also indicate information surrounding family dynamics where appropriate.

Cindie grew up in the Southern United States. She lived at home with her sister and her mother. Her father also lived at home, but had recently been transferred for work and was looking for a home where they could move. In 1995, Cindie was 27 when her

24-year-old sister, her mother and her sister's boyfriend were killed by a drunk driver. They were on their way to visit Cindie's father, and Cindie had opted not to go with them. Cindie is currently 47 years old and continues to live in her childhood home.

Dee is 19 years old and lives in the Western United States. She is one of four siblings in her family. She has an older sister who is 26, an older brother who was 21 years old when he passed away, and a younger sister who is 15. Dee grew up a few hours from where she is now a college student. Until she moved away for school, Dee lived at home with her mother, brother and sister. Her father committed suicide when Dee was 10 years old. She recognizes her brother as the primary male influence in her life. In January 2010, Dee's brother died in an alcohol-related car crash, where he was a passenger.

Lisa is 23 years old and teaches second grade. She grew up in the Eastern United States. She has a 15-year-old sister, a 26-year-old sister and a 14-year-old brother, who would be 16 today. A drunk driver struck and killed her father and her 14-year-old brother in December 2007. She now lives in family's home and provides primary care for her 15-year-old sister, due to her mother's rigorous work schedule.

Linda is the oldest of six children – five girls and one boy. They are all approximately one-and-a-half years apart. Her family moved around a lot, due to her father's involvement in the military. Her brother was also in the military. Linda was 20 years old when her 18-year-old brother was killed in a drunk driving crash. He was a passenger in the vehicle that crashed. Linda was a senior in college at the time of her

loss. Currently, she lives in the Eastern United States, and maintains a close relationship with her family.

Leila is 30 years old. She grew up and currently lives in the Eastern United States. She is one of three siblings in her family. She grew up with her mother and father, as well as with her two siblings; Leila is the middle child. Her sister is five years older than Leila, and her brother is two years younger. In June 2007, when Leila was 27 years old, a drunk driver struck and killed her 25-year-old brother. Currently, Leila lives with her partner, who was there at the time of Leila's loss.

Renee is 25 years old. She is one of three siblings. Her brother is 24 and her sister was 19 years old at the time of her death. She grew up in a close family in the South East of the United States. In June 2007, Renee's sister was a passenger in a drunk driving-related crash, and she did not survive. Renee is married with two children. She lives in the same town where she grew up with her partner.

Whisper's Mom is 26 years old and lives in the Midwestern United States. She grew up in a single-parent household. Her mother is continually in and out of her life due to drug addiction. Her father passed away when she was a child. She is one of four siblings. Her sister is 33, followed by another who is 30 and an older brother who was 29. Whisper's Mom was 25 when a drunk driver killed her brother as he was walking home. Whisper's Mom currently has a daughter and lives with her friend.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss the findings the individual interviews yielded. I will call out the dialectical tensions surviving siblings experience, as well as the liminal

spaces in which they reside. In addition, I will discuss the praxical patterns surviving siblings use in negotiating those tensions.

CHAPTER 4: Making Meaning Amidst the Loss

I stare blankly at the computer screen; I review the transcripts from my interviews; I am blocked. I don't want to feel pain right now. I want to "think my way out of this one" (which would make my hospice counselor cringe). I want to stuff my emotion, keep busy and block anything unpleasant or painful. I can only take one loss at a time, and right now, I am suffering another loss that makes me feel a familiar unpleasantness.

During the process of this thesis, my partner leaves. I ask him to pack up and move out because I can tell he wants to go, but does not have the courage to tell me. In part, it is because of this research – something I am only admitting as I type it. This work has resurfaced a part of me that I normally allow to stay hidden, below the veneer of happiness. Like the surviving siblings I speak with, I try not to talk about my sister and father unless provoked. I don't lie about their existence, but I certainly do not go out of my way to bring them up. I don't like making others feel uncomfortable. This extends to the relationship I share(d) with my partner. My counselor tells me that my unusually high threshold for pain and discomfort leads me to remain in my relationships longer than normal because I try to avoid the pain each loss brings – a familiar pain. As much as I initially deny her assertion, I know that she is correct.

Amidst this research, my previous feelings of sadness, confusion and sorrow reemerge from deep within, and the person my partner once knew recedes. The person I am, at my core, resurfaces, showing me (reminding me) of the importance of this research, and the importance of grief communication. If I remain as I am, in a

relationship where we do not discuss this loss, I am denying my reality: When I was a 20-year-old college student, a drunk driver killed my father and my sister. My mother survived. Today, each and every decision I make is influenced by my past and anticipated future. I cannot pretend this loss does not affect and influence me. Just as I tell myself there is no greater loss than that of Kari and my dad, I also tell myself that if I can survive this loss, I can survive anything. Which, according to my counselor, has recently worked against me. But it is that same feeling of strength – amidst the loss – that drives me to end a relationship that has persevered beyond its shelf life; now it is stale and stagnant. When I am unhappy, it is my loss that drives me to push back.

It has taken me a week to begin writing this chapter. Now I feel my old self reemerging once again, pushing back, and refusing to allow this work to go stagnant. Sibling loss in emergent adulthood is a topic that still makes me squeamish. Before each interview, I get nervous and anxious. I allow myself one hour to prepare – to get into the “grief communication” zone. I pour myself a tall glass of water, I make a hot cup of Earl Grey tea, and I prepare my office with everything I might possibly need for these important conversations – pen, highlighter, paper, email correspondence, informed consent, interview protocol and questions (just to name a few items). My home office is clean and organized for my phone interviews. I have the phone set up on the office table, over a towel to muffle any echo. Next to this is my digital recorder. I practice hitting record several times. I sit in my office for 30 minutes prior to each interview, carefully studying my questions and informed consent. Now, I think about the conversation I am about to have. I study the participant’s information she has provided me. I make sure I

know her sibling's name and the date of death. I feel unexpectedly nervous with anticipation prior to each interview.

This work allows me to engage in seven wonderful conversations with surviving siblings who also lost their brothers and sisters to drunk drivers. Their losses range from three months to thirty years ago, providing a wide spectrum of the grief experience during emergent adulthood. Each participant's experience is unique. However, overarching patterns of dialectical tensions emerged as well.

Each conversation was guided by approximately 25 interview questions that aimed to answer three research questions:

RQ1: How are dialectical tensions experienced by emergent adult surviving siblings who have suffered the loss of their brother(s) or sister(s) to a drunk driver?

RQ2: How do surviving siblings negotiate these dialectical tensions across instructional contexts?

RQ3: How do surviving siblings negotiate these dialectical tensions across professional contexts?

While the original scope of this work was meant to focus on the college experience, it soon became apparent that beyond the college classroom, surviving siblings in emergent adulthood were also experiencing patterns of dialectical tensions and liminality. As a result, I expanded this study out to include emergent adults – adults in their late teens and twenties at the time of their siblings' death. Originally, there were two research questions: RQ1 and RQ2. I included RQ3 to more broadly understand the experiences of emergent adults beyond academic settings to other organizational contexts.

The conversations with each participant were unique; loss in itself is a unique, individual experience that will vary from person to person. Perhaps what stands out to me the most in my conversations is the strength surviving siblings exhibit. Surviving siblings are strong; they are tough as nails. They don't want to burden others with their loss; they don't want others to feel uncomfortable with their story; they feel the pain of their loss, but they tend to not talk about it unless it is brought up for them. There is also a sense of pride woven into the communication of surviving siblings. They are strong and proud and refuse to allow their grief to mark them.

At the outset of these interviews, I hoped to gain information about dialectical tensions from participants without specifically naming dialectical tensions/theory for them. As a result, I developed interview questions that served as a prompt/guide in our conversations. Narrative, a form of communication, allows for freedom where participants may name and reflect on "their fears and desires" (Madison, 2005, p. 56). It is through narrative interviews that I learned about the experiences of other surviving siblings. Each participant expressed her appreciation for the opportunity to share her story. The following are the stories of seven participants whose lives were irrevocably impacted by drunk driving. Each conversation was special and unique, and each participant made a valuable contribution to this work.

Two dominant dialectical tensions emerged in my conversations with these surviving siblings. While it is impossible to claim that these tensions extend to each and every emergent adult who loses a sibling to drunk driving, it is noteworthy that these tensions do exist, and are in need of close examination. The two primary tensions that

emerged in participant interviews were: 1) Openness-Closedness and 2) Connectedness-Autonomy. Dialectical tensions are interconnected and exist simultaneously. In fact, while stability-change is not called out as an overarching theme in this study, this tension is wrapped up in both openness-closedness and connectedness-autonomy. As a result, I found it most useful to indicate this tension where applicable without calling it out as a separate tension.

First, I will talk about the two aforementioned tensions in greater detail, including the pattern participants' experiences of liminality. Finally, I will talk about the different patterns of praxis that emerged in this work.

Openness-Closedness

The tension of openness-closedness concerns the surviving sibling's desire to remain open about his or her deceased sibling and cause of death, while at the same time grappling with the desire to remain closed to discussing the loss. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) find that the openness-closedness tension functions "in ongoing interplay with one another" (p. 139). When applied to surviving siblings, we can see that this tension pulls siblings between a desire to be honest, "open" and forthright with the crash. Yet, at the same time, they are pulled toward the desire to keep their loss to themselves, to remain "closed" toward discussing their experience. This is recognized by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) as a "self boundary" in which a person is open or closed depending on the risks; "the self boundary must be protected from the vulnerability and risk inherent in disclosure. At the same time, however, there is pressure for a person to grant others access to his or her private territory" (pp. 139-140). The resulting openness-

closedness tension occurs for many reasons: Some siblings don't want to burden others or make them feel uncomfortable by discussing the circumstances of their loss. Others don't want to be perceived as weak or as if they are using their loss as an excuse of some sort – I liken this to a fear of “victimization.” Yet, each sibling expressed a desire to be open, to feel comfortable communicating her loss with others.

There is tension and uncertainty when a surviving sibling approaches her instructor about her loss. When do you ask for extensions? When is it appropriate or necessary to provide accommodations for students? In an academic environment, there are no set rules concerning when we may be open about life outside of school and when we must be closed. Cindie was a graduate student when her sister and mother were killed in a drunk driving crash. She articulates her experience of requesting a second thesis extension from her department:

I filed for a second extension and they denied me on my second extension. What's funny is the person who denied me on my second extension had just started teaching as a professor the first semester I was in graduate school. He's the one that denied me. He knew my family had been killed and he said, “We haven't seen you do anything to advance your thesis work.”

This instructor's closed response to Cindie's openness is unfortunate and indicates the overall lack of attention to grief by those in a position of power. He does not acknowledge her loss at all, indicating to her that this does not warrant future discussion or consideration. This position of closedness, as assumed by Cindie's instructor, and therefore by Cindie, is articulated by other emergent adult surviving siblings as well.

There is uncertainty of protocol surrounding grief disclosure in an academic environment, which results in openness/closedness tensions. Due to the timing of her

brother's death, Dee missed the first week-and-a-half of the winter quarter. She shares the conflict she experiences in communicating her loss to her professors. There is an uncertainty of whether to remain open or closed about her loss:

My first chemistry quiz; I failed that. My first midterm, I failed too. I was, like, really worried about my grades because they're based mostly on your quizzes and your tests; it's like there wasn't homework ... I didn't talk to my professor about chemistry. I talked to my professor about math because I had missed the first two quizzes. I asked him if I could make them up, and he said that it wasn't really allowed, but he'd keep in mind my situation at the end of the quarter, and if I still needed help, to go talk to him and he'd help me out.

This response from Dee's math instructor is disheartening and lacks in any real support or direction. In this interaction, the message Dee receives is that her loss is not means for accommodation and that she must do what she has to in order to succeed in her course and maybe she'll receive support later. It is this interaction that guides her in choosing whether to remain open or closed toward her loss with other instructors, as dialectical tensions are guided by our past experience and anticipated future. This instructor's inability to view the death of her brother as a special circumstance where she needs accommodation guides Dee in the future decision to remain closed with her instructors.

Dee chooses not to disclose her loss to her professors the following quarter (her second quarter returning to school after her brother's death). When determining whether to disclose her loss, Dee shares that she does not want to be treated differently than her peers. The same message that is reinforced by her math instructor is now the message she reinforces for herself:

I don't want special treatment or ... any pity or anything from it ... I just don't want them to, like, have any reasons to treat me different from any other students because, I mean, I know ... a lot of people have been

through different things in their life, and they've had to deal with that. I don't know, I just feel like I shouldn't get special treatment ... but it's fine.

Linda articulates a similar sentiment, a desire to be treated equally, no different than anyone else. She states that she did not need to be “handled special” and as a result, she did not bring the loss of her brother up for discussion. Note that this decision for closedness is related to stability-change as well. Due to their desire for stability (resisting change), surviving siblings prefer to be treated the same as their peers as a way of maintaining an element of stability that does not exist in their personal lives. As a result, they adhere to closedness; being open risks surviving siblings feeling as if their difference and loss may mark them in negative ways.

Linda and Dee both articulate a tension between openness-closedness when they consider sharing their loss with their instructors; they both lean toward closed. Lisa, however, had a very different experience with openness-closedness. Her personal situation spanned both worlds of work and academia, as she was in the final semester of her bachelor’s degree, which involved student teaching at a local elementary school. She recalls her decision to disclose her loss immediately to her advisor. However, she chose to wait two weeks before opening up to her student teacher instructor:

I immediately let [my advisor] know of what had happened I didn't let [my cooperating teacher] know at first; it was probably not until maybe two weeks in just because I didn't want to go in the first day letting her know that, and thinking maybe I'm not ready to do it, or I'm not going to be a good candidate, or anything. You know, I just wanted her to get to know me first.

The decision to remain closed stems from Lisa’s desire to first prove herself as a strong candidate for the teaching position. She wants the instructor to get to know her as a

person so her loss is not perceived as a flaw or weakness that will affect her work performance. Once she does let the cooperating instructor know, she is surprised by how well Lisa was able to maintain a “straight face” the first two weeks. Lisa shares with her that “everything is fine” and that she is “here to teach students” and is pleased that her cooperating instructor had no idea. Like Linda’s experience, Lisa believes that her colleagues cannot really know the effect this loss had on her life, as they did not know her before her father and brother died. As a result, she is open to an extent with her colleagues. They are very supportive and kind, but she keeps the talk about her loss fairly surface level and only touches on it when asked for more detail.

In addition to exploring openness-closedness across instructional contexts, it is important that we include those tensions that emergent adult surviving siblings experience in professional settings. On the day Leila found out her brother was killed, she received a phone call with a job offer – it was the job she wanted. She accepted the position and began her work two weeks later, stating that, in two weeks, “I’ll probably be fine.” When Leila was unable to function to her full capacity at work, her supervisor called her in to talk with her. She recalls the experience as less than productive. Leila tried to be open with her supervisor, asking her to be patient:

I actually cried in her office, and I said, “I’m really trying the best that I can here. I just hope you can be patient with me. I’m trying to figure stuff out.” And she just didn’t know how to talk to me. She ... was very cold hearted. I didn’t expect her to completely understand what I was going through, but it was just...it was an awful time and ... she didn’t make it easier.

Leila’s supervisor never told her she was sorry for her loss, and many of her coworkers simply did not acknowledge it at all. Their inability to verbally recognize her

experiences closes her off, indicating to her that future conversation surrounding this issue is not safe for her. Her self-boundary requires that Leila remain closed in openness-closedness as a means of self-protection.

Leila, like many other surviving siblings experienced complex legal matters surrounding drunk driving-related loss: Meetings with attorneys, court dates, sentencings and other outside legal procedures forced Leila to request time off at her new job. This results in dialectical tension of openness-closedness concerning disclosure: How much do we share? Can we really tell our supervisors and/or colleagues what we're dealing with when we're not at work? What happens when our loss interferes with our work or requires us to take time off? This process put a great burden on Leila's perceived work performance, which brought up issues surrounding openness-closedness:

There were legal procedures going on ... my parents and I were meeting with ... a prosecutor who was going to be prosecuting the drunk driver. My parents were scheduling meetings with him in the afternoon ... I had talked to my boss and everything, and I told her what was going on and that I needed to take time off ... I hadn't been there all that long, and also, I had not accrued any sort of vacation time or anything. So what I did is ... "go into the negative." I was basically borrowing time from the company ... I had to basically accrue that time just by working more and not taking ... vacation time ... For the first year, all of the vacation time that I took was to go meet with the attorney or the prosecutor and to go to court dates ... like the preliminary hearing, the sentencing hearing, and all that sort of stuff ... The following year, I wanted to take time off for Christmas, and in order to get that time off and "go further into the negative" with my vacation time, my boss had to sign a form ... I went to have her sign the form ... probably the fourth ... time she had to do it, and she said, "Okay, this is the last time I'm going to do this, but I really want you to not have to go in the negative anymore." You know what? Even like acknowledging ... the reason why I was doing it was because of court stuff, not because I was going off on vacation and having fun ... At that point, I really needed a vacation. I really needed time off to be with my family. So it just kind of further compounded the issues that I had there.

Leila expresses her frustration with her supervisor at this point, stating that her supervisor implies Leila is taking excessive vacations, rather than attending to critical legal procedures outside of work. In her supervisor's decision to refrain from discussing the reasoning behind the time Leila is not at work, Leila feels less and less comfortable disclosing her loss and the legal implications tied up in that loss.

Beyond those tension-filled interactions with instructors and supervisors, emerging adult surviving siblings engage in communication with their peers and colleagues that can be wrought with tensions surrounding uncertainty of openness-closedness. Surviving siblings engage in communicative acts with their peers surrounding their loss. Cindie recalls her experience at her high school reunion only a year after her sister's death. Many of her classmates did not know about her sister's death:

Having to answer the question, "How's your sister doing?" "Jessica's dead." "What do you mean she's dead?" "She was killed." After a while nobody wanted to talk about it with me anymore.

By remaining open to the questions she receives about her sister, the unsaid response by others is that Cindie should instead remain closed. In openness-closedness, the decision of whether to remain open or to remain closed is often mediated by the other person's response in the series of utterances.

There is also a healing component involved in talking about our loss openly, without constraint. Dee discusses her criteria when deciding whether to be open or closed in her grief with her friends:

Sometimes it just feels right talking about it ... I enjoy talking about my brother because ... it makes me happy and I like remembering everything;

like all of the memories we have ... I really cherish them ... I can talk about it with people that I don't know, but some of the people I'm really close with ... I have a harder time talking with them because I don't want to make them uncomfortable ... it could be, like, awkward for them because they don't know what to say. I don't want to put someone in a position where they feel like they have to say something. And I don't want to make other people uncomfortable ... with my close friends ... it's taken me a while to talk to them about it. And, like, even my best friend; I don't really talk to her about it that much.

Dee is unable to remain open with those closest to her due to her concern for their emotional states. Rather than focusing on her own self-boundary, she is focused on the boundaries of others in her communicative interactions. She is concerned that she will make others feel uncomfortable. Negotiating these tensions between openness-closedness in terms of how others feel is complicated. Equally complicated is the pull between openness-closedness when curious people ask invasive questions at inappropriate times.

Negotiating the open-closed tensions require a delicate balance that is contextual, and depends on the mood, the environment and the person who is talking with a surviving sibling. Due to the circumstances surrounding the death of her sister, Renne's family was put in the media spotlight. Living in a smaller, rural community, and as a local business owner, she was approached often with questions about her loss. She navigates the open-closed tension depending on her own emotional state, the context, and the person asking:

It was kind of uncomfortable – especially with people that I didn't know that had seen it on the news or read it in the newspaper or if they were just friends of the family ... There were a couple of times when I did kind of fly off the handle and tell them "I really don't want to talk about it to you right now" or "This isn't a good time to talk," and just kind of have some time to myself ... If they were to ask, "Why is John [the driver who caused the crash] still out driving, [after] this accident?" I would say, "I really don't know." How's your family coping? "They're doing great –

as well as they can be for losing somebody.” It was never a very lengthy detailed answer. It’s just always short and brief and to the point.

Here, Renee does her best to negotiate openness-closedness when it comes to uninvited inquiry into her loss. She negotiates this tension via somewhat restrained speech. She articulates a desire to “shout out to the world” what happened to her sister, and the fact that the person who caused the crash was out and driving around town. She expresses frustration and anger, but chooses instead to remain closed in dialectical interactions. She shares that the reason she is participating in this interview with me is to talk about her loss, and to practice finding her voice. She said that she normally keeps her feelings to herself and is a reserved person. She wants to learn how to better communicate what is happening and to better understand her feelings toward it. This tension of being open, of verbalizing her beliefs surrounding the death of her sister, is overshadowed by closedness, as Renee is generally quiet and feels uncomfortable asserting her opinion.

Openness-closedness is clearly mediated by the party with whom a surviving sibling engages. Linda, for example, articulates how she learned to remain closed about her loss:

And you couldn't say anything about it because it would upset mom and dad ... My mother had a horrible time; if you said his name or talked about it, then she would just get upset. Well in reality, she's upset already and it's not going to make it any worse. You don't know that as a kid. You don't understand that as a child even though I was 20 years old.

This is what Linda learned at home surrounding openness-closedness tensions, which directly translated to dialectical tensions with her peers at school:

I remember going to school and when somebody asked you how you were ... I [told] the first two people that I'm dying; all I can do is cry; I'm

having a hard time. And they backed away. I'm, like, okay, and the third person who asked me that – I told them I was fine.

Through communication and dialectical interactions with others, Linda learns to navigate the dialectical tensions with others via their response toward her. Their response was of discomfort, and this interaction pushed her toward closed.

Surviving siblings don't want their loss to mark them. This is how Lisa navigates openness-closedness in communication surrounding her loss. Lisa articulates her desire to be open. Yet, she also expresses concern that if she shares her loss too soon, then that is all the person will remember:

If it's someone who I know ... is going to turn into a long-term friendship or ... even ... a friendship for the time being – if I feel comfortable – I will open up but, I don't want ... to put the victim label on me where I'm like “Oh, I'm Lisa and I lost my dad and my brother and, you know, I'm sad about it.” I don't want ... that to be the only thing [people] remember about me ... I don't usually open up about it till I'm really friends with someone – unless it comes up in accidental conversation. Then, I have no problem opening up about it but I definitely do not just open up and let them know about it if I don't really feel like I have a reason to yet.

Lisa's personal criteria for disclosure echo the fact that each surviving sibling has her own criteria for openness versus closedness that is as contextual as it is personal. As we see in the aforementioned examples, depending on the experience of participants, the decision to remain open versus closed varied. Often times the decision of remaining open is mediated by the other person in the conversation, as we see with “accidental openness,” as articulated above by Lisa. In fact, we might infer from this research that the other party is the controlling party in the dialectical tensions surrounding sibling loss in emergent adulthood resulting from drunk driving. But there are ways surviving siblings take control, as I will discuss next.

There are questions that make an emerging adult surviving sibling squeamish. One such question is, “Do you have any siblings?” Seemingly simple questions about a person’s family are deceptively complex and interlaced with dialectical tensions, as the seven surviving siblings in this study indicate.

Some surviving siblings are incredibly open; for example, when someone asks Cindie if she has siblings, she says, “I had a sister, but she was killed years ago by a drunk driver.” Linda is equally candid in her approach; she tells people that she “had one brother” and that she “has four sisters.” If people ask her what happened to her brother – they normally do – she tells them that a drunk driver killed him. And if they still want to talk about it, she engages with them, and if they don’t want to talk about it, she leaves it alone.

Lisa is somewhere between open and closed. When people ask her how many siblings she has, her response varies depending on who is asking. When her students, who are in second grade, ask her how old her brother is, she tells them that he is sixteen years old. He was fourteen when he passed away, but she does not want to disclose his death to her students. She calls it “acting” and discusses it as a way to talk about him in the present, as if he were still here. However, if a colleague or peer asks her, she tells them that she has two sisters and a brother who passed away.

Surviving siblings get nervous when they anticipate the question coming. They are never quite sure of how open they should be; as a result, they strike a dialectical balance between open-closed, allowing others to broach the topic. Both Dee and Leila

articulate a sense of panic when people unexpectedly inquire about family. Leila shares a recent experience between open and closed:

I was out to dinner with these people and nobody knew what had happened. There's a woman who, just out of blue, turns to me and ... she said, "Oh, do you have any siblings?" And we're out to dinner, it was a social situation, everybody was just talking about ... nothing in general ... It was light conversation, so it just didn't seem to me to be, like, the right time to all of a sudden bring up something so serious and have people be awkwardly eating their dinner so I said ... I have an older sister and a younger brother and that was it. And now I don't know what would have happened if she had ... asked ... what they did, what their jobs were or anything like that – but she kind of just left it at that so it was fine. And it definitely brought ... a sense of panic when she asked me because I was like, "I'm going to tell her if she asks a question. I'm not going to act like he never existed." I personally feel like just for me that I would never say that I just have an older sister, or I don't have a brother, or anything like that. In my head, in my heart, I do have a brother ... But I was relieved she was asking ... it was just a weird situation.

Leila experiences panic and relief at the thought of potentially discussing her family. But it is the certainty/uncertainty in that moment of open/closed that causes her to be nervous. She also hopes to "get it out there" so it is no longer a secret. Here, we see Leila strike the balance between open-closed. By navigating the open-closed tensions toward open, yet without being completely open, she feels a sense of relief.

Similarly, Dee experiences nervous anticipation when she hears the question coming:

It always makes me kind of nervous because, like, I could tell that it's about to come up or, like, I'm going to have to say something about it, and I don't know how they're going to react. It kind of, like, puts me on the edge and, like, I don't know how much of the story I should tell them or, like, what they need to know ... Usually they see, like, a picture of my brother or something ... and I just go, "Oh yeah, that's my brother ... he died a few months ago" ... Sometimes I'm like, "He was killed by a drunk driver," and "He was killed in a car accident" ... but I don't usually get

into everything that happened ... I'm not sure what to say because I don't know what information they already have.

Dee has a presentation coming up in her Italian class where she's been asked to give a presentation about her family. She is not sure as of yet what she will say or do; she hasn't decided.

Compounding the issue of Dee's Italian class presentation is the uncertainty she feels in responding to questions about her brother or about how she is feeling with the loss, as she risks making others feel uncomfortable when she responds openly:

It seems to be more complicated when you ask, like, how are you because, like, I didn't know what to tell them, like, if I answer honestly or, like, which answer they'd rather hear.

There is a definite focus on what the other person *wants* to hear rather than what the surviving sibling is feeling. Dee's concern with making classmates uncomfortable with her story pushes the openness-closedness tension. It is difficult to negotiate what is appropriate when it comes to this tension surrounding sibling loss and drunk driving in a college classroom.

Surviving siblings negotiate the open-closed tension, as well as what is appropriate to disclose, when they face issues surrounding their participation in their communities and with their peers. The next tension, connectedness-autonomy appears as its own category, though it is important to recognize the interconnectedness of both openness-closedness and connectedness-autonomy. As surviving siblings crave connection with their peers, they simultaneously struggle between openness-closedness in those interactions. As a result, siblings often require autonomy in their grief, removing

themselves from social interactions. I will discuss connectedness-autonomy in more detail in the subsequent section.

Connectedness-Autonomy

Each sibling, in her own way, articulates the tension of connectedness-autonomy. This may also be thought of as the decision of whether or not to participate in social interactions, as well as what it means to “be there” as a friend. Connection-autonomy stems from a more “general level in the decision to get involved or not, with very little attention to the particulars of what such an involvement would entail” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 95). Rather than looking at this as a romantic/intimate tension, I view this as a tension faced by surviving siblings when they desire connectedness with their peers, yet also crave the autonomy needed to grieve alone, and to not have to explain themselves.

Connectedness-autonomy takes many shapes among surviving siblings. There is a desire to be social, to engage with one’s peers, yet there is also a strong desire for privacy, to back out of social commitments. In addition, the decision of *how* to grieve and with whom is an issue. While surviving siblings may find relief in talking about their loss with close friends and family, there is also a fear of overburdening others with the painful stories and recollections.

There are many social engagements to which emergent adults are invited – after-work happy hours, college parties, etc. There seems to be a tension between wanting to interact with people, to be social and around friends, yet a simultaneous desire for privacy, to be alone. While surviving siblings wish for their old life, where they may

have engaged in free-spirited fun, their loss marks each experience, forever altering their outlook on social commitments and interactions.

Cindie's experience surrounding connectedness-autonomy showed through in her "love/hate" relationship with alcohol. If people around her drank, she became angry. But rather than remain autonomous in her interactions with others, as some surviving siblings do, she chose to engage in communication, seeking out connection:

Because I wouldn't drink and touch alcohol and I got mad at anybody else who would drink and drive in front of me, even one drink ... I almost lost my best friend over of this ... my boyfriend broke up with me. He was drinking more and more. My love-hate relationship with alcohol, that took a long time to get past. I've always been a very social person. It just got hard to go out and do stuff because everyone was drinking. So I started not having fun [at] parties.

Cindie began engaging in autonomous social activities surrounding her loss. She attended a candlelight vigil by herself in December 2000, and it was in that tension of connectedness-autonomy where Cindie met a victim advocate from MADD who helped her get involved with the MADD community. As a result of this interaction, Cindie began speaking regularly at victim impact panels, which proved to be healing for her in her grief.

Surviving siblings find autonomy involves having less pressure and is more peaceful. Dee articulates her desire for autonomy, while at the same time appreciating the value of connectedness in the college environment:

Last quarter, I kind of, like, withdrew myself because ... I was uncomfortable, like, going out and then meeting all these new people. But ... the people that I do know are ... really supportive and if I need anything, they'll be there for me.

Dee finds comfort in the connectedness she shares with her peers, but desires autonomy to be alone with her grief. She chooses to withdraw from social engagements (e.g., parties) and instead prefers to be alone. She expresses a desire to sit in her room and relax. She prefers to do things that keep her mind off of her loss.

Drinking and “partying” is popular among emergent adults. The desire to be autonomous stems from the desire to remove one’s self from situations where others may be engaging in risk behaviors that directly conflict with a surviving siblings’ loss (e.g., drinking heavily, drunk driving, etc.). Arnett (2000) finds that emergent adults tend to experiment more and engage in risk behaviors more than any other group (p. 475). This is a significant finding, as this indicates direct conflict with surviving siblings affected by drunk driving. Dee further expresses her desire to remain autonomous:

A lot of my friends, like, they go out and they drink and do stuff. I've never really been into that, but, like, especially now because, like, some of my friends ... were drinking and driving and that's always been something that I've really been against ... I've gotten into, like, really bad arguments with them about it before, so if I were to go out with them now, and, like, I know they're going to do it, ... I don't know how I would react ... At the same time it's brought us together ... it's also kind of separating me from them.

This connectedness-autonomy tension is highlighted in Dee’s desire to remain close to her friends, citing the loss as drawing her friends closer together. Yet at the same time, it is the loss that drives them apart as she anticipates that some of her peers might engage in high risk behaviors, like drunk driving.

It takes effort for a surviving sibling to seek connectedness with her peers, as a result, autonomy is the less exhausting option. Dee articulates her need for autonomy:

Last quarter ... part of me just, like, didn't want to make the effort to, like, go out and, like, have to hold up a conversation with someone. So ... I shut myself off because, like, there's certain things I, like, did not want to talk about.

When interactions may require a surviving sibling to talk about their loss, depending on the mood, they opt for either connectedness or autonomy. As Dee reflects above, she does not want to be placed in a situation where she must discuss her circumstances, so she opts to remain alone.

Leila attempts to engage in connectedness in a social environment – a bar.

However, she finds this to be a difficult space after losing her brother. She finds this social interaction to be a challenge, as she is now hyper-aware of how often those around her engage in heavy drinking. She is also uncomfortable due to the peer pressure to engage in similar behavior:

I'm aware that [drunk driving] happens a lot. I was out last night and my friend was drinking ... I was just drinking water and my other friend came up to me ... She knew what had happened to [my brother] and she was like, "You're just drinking water? That's boring." And I ... just kind of look at her. I didn't say anything but I wanted to be like, "Are you kidding me? Do you remember? Like, do you know who you're talking to right now?" It's just funny, like, how quickly some people forget but, it definitely was just on my mind because I'm always thinking about it. It's like I don't think people realize how much I think about it. It's not like an obsession or anything but ... I'm very conscious of how much my life has changed now ... it's definitely changed me.

Leila's desire for connectedness with peers, to feel normal and like her old self, is in tension with her desire for autonomy so she does not have to face issues like these. There is overlap here between connectedness-autonomy and openness-closedness. We see that she wants to say something to this person who questions her choice to not drink alcohol, but she chooses to instead ignore the comment.

Beyond the desire to be social and the desire for privacy as a result of the connectedness-autonomy tension, surviving siblings also experience a desire to experience their grief alone, as well as a desire to talk about it with others. Renee experiences a connectedness-autonomy tension:

Well, I own my business, so I was able to take leave as needed ... I actually spent a lot of time with my family. It actually drove me closer to my family ... I did take time off, my husband was there to kind of support me and so forth. Friends tried to keep me busy, asking me to go out or whatever. But ... it's not really something you want to go out and talk about.

This tension between Renee's desire to be connected to her family through communication and her desire to *not* talk about her loss and to remain autonomous in her grief reinforces the connectedness-autonomy tension.

The desire for connectedness-desire for autonomy tension further manifests when siblings feel they *should* be talking about their loss with their friends, but don't really want to do so. Leila discusses the tension she felt when her best friend checked in with her daily after her loss:

My best friend ... was calling me like every day ... I really couldn't handle it ... I was becoming despondent and I felt bad ... I told her ... "I really know you care about me," I tried to, like, word it nicely, but I was like, "I can't talk to you every single day." I started to push away because ... it was just too much to talk to people, it was too much to be social ... The first couple of weeks were, like, people surrounding me but then things kind of, like, died down. People go back to their jobs and everything ... I wasn't seeking out any sort of social activities or anything ... I didn't want to really see anybody at all ... That probably continued for at least a year. I mean it wasn't like I wasn't answering phone calls or I wasn't going out, but it was really rare. It was really hard for me to see anybody except for my core group of four or five friends, every once in a while.

Leila's pull between connectedness-autonomy shows the experience a surviving sibling feels between obligatory communicative interactions and her desire to be alone, to remain autonomous. Leila feels she is supposed to want to go out with people, but desires fewer commitments in her social life so she can focus on her grief. The only thing she could think about was her brother's death, so going out required her to pretend that she wanted to be there, rather than just remaining alone. There is an issue of liminality here as well. Leila articulates her frustration and anger with her new identity, as prior to her brother's death, she was social and outgoing. Now, she feels the need for solitude. This frustration echoes the liminal state surviving siblings experience as their identity takes shape in a new, unexpected direction that directly contradicts their previous identity.

Lisa, however, finds that she is forced to do most of her grieving apart from others in an autonomous space due to the unwillingness of her family to engage in connectedness with her. Lisa articulates her experience with connectedness-autonomy in the grief process:

I had to do a lot of the grieving by myself ... As much as my two sisters and I are close, we're not close in the sense that we talk about our feelings like that ... we just kind of, you know, we kind of kept to ourselves and grieved ... It's kind of like we just shy away from it and, you know, we talk about it but, we don't talk about it that much.

When her family was unable to engage in connectedness with her, Lisa sought out her boyfriend and best friend; however, this also left Lisa in a space of autonomy. Lisa discusses her pull between connecting with her best friend and boyfriend in this space of loss and in their desire for more autonomy:

Initially, when the accident happened ... I did not want to be alone. I wanted [my best friend and my boyfriend] at my house with me all of the

time ... it was like I didn't even want them to go home to go to sleep; I wanted them to sleep at my house. I think that like with my boyfriend, it caused a lot of conflict because ... I was like, "I need someone here" ... Being by myself made me think about everything; having him here, having my friend near kept my mind off things ... It caused conflict in a sense ... I turned really needy towards my friend and my boyfriend. I was, like, I know [my friend] needs her own space so I gave ... her space. But I also knew that if I needed her, she would be there for me.

In this space of connectedness-autonomy, Lisa craves more interaction with her peers, yet her peers need space and are unable to provide Lisa with the communication and support she seeks. As so often happens with surviving siblings, she is left with a lot of responsibility in a space of little emotional support – there is no one she can openly and regularly speak with, which pushes her toward the pole of autonomy in her grief.

As surviving siblings negotiate connectedness-autonomy, coupled with openness-closedness, they utilize patterns of praxis. These patterns help them in navigating their way through the complex and often confusing web of dialectical tensions they encounter in work, at school, in conversation with supervisors or instructors, as well as with peers and colleagues. These praxical patterns of communication are how surviving siblings go about the tension and contradiction negotiation, ideally moving toward positive and productive change.

In order to effectively navigate openness-closedness and connectedness-autonomy, both dialectical tensions that are inherent in loss, surviving siblings engage in patterns of praxis. I discuss these patterns in the following section.

Patterns of Praxis in Contradiction Negotiation

There are eight primary patterns of praxis highlighted by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) in dialectical theory. While that list is not exhaustive, it provides a nice offering

of different patterns of praxis people may use when negotiating dialectical tensions. These patterns range from dysfunctional to high functioning. They are: denial, disorientation, spiraling inversion, segmentation, balance, integration, recalibration and reaffirmation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In this particular study, the patterns of praxis that emerged include: disorientation, segmentation, and balance. In addition, I highlight one additional pattern of praxis that emerged in this work, sharing.

Disorientation is less productive and more dysfunctional in the process of dialectical theory and contradiction negotiation. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) define the disorientation pattern of praxis as involving “a fatalistic attitude in which contradictions are regarded as inevitable, negative, and unresponsive to praxical change” (p. 62). While surviving siblings may occasionally engage in dysfunctional patterns of praxis, they also engage in high functioning praxical patterns. Segmentation “involves an ebb-and-flow pattern ... the basis of inversion is ... topic or activity domain” (p. 63). Balance requires compromise. Dialectical tensions still exist in balance, but by each party in a communicative interaction striking a compromise, the different “polarities are legitimated at once in compromise” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 6). Sharing, the praxical pattern that also emerged in this work, involves the act of verbalizing one’s story concerning loss. I will discuss each of these patterns of praxis beginning with disorientation.

Disorientation. Disorientation is a less functioning praxical pattern of communication, yet it seems surviving siblings engage in this pattern at one point or another. Generally speaking, this pattern emerges when the other person mediating the

dialectical tensions surrounding loss is not receptive or supportive of the surviving sibling's loss and needs.

For example, Dee articulated her struggle with openness-closedness in sharing her loss with her chemistry, math and psychology professors. She chose not to disclose her loss to her chemistry professor and instead worked with friends to study and catch up, as she accepted the fact that this instructor would not likely accommodate her needs – nor does she see her situation as one in need of special accommodation. This praxical pattern of disorientation is further reinforced when Dee opens up to her math professor. This professor chooses not to accommodate her on deadline extensions, but states that if she is still having a hard time the end of the quarter, he might be inclined to help her. Based on this unclear protocol, and inconsistency in messages from those around her, Dee engages in a praxical pattern of disorientation, viewing this instructor's stance as inevitable and necessary, as she believes that her circumstances do not warrant accommodation. Dee's experience provides a rich understanding of disorientation in an academic environment. Now I will explore this praxis of communication in a professional context.

In an organizational setting where loss is not acknowledged, disorientation emerges as the praxical pattern of communication. Leila's interaction with her supervisor moves her toward an unsatisfying and less functional pattern of praxis surrounding openness-closedness. It is important to recognize her supervisor as reinforcing this pattern of praxis as well. Based on the messages Leila receives from her supervisor, she can only assume that the tensions she experiences at work are not going to change, which results in a sense of helplessness and frustration. Leila is unable to discuss her loss at

work for the most part. Rather than risk disclosure, and subsequent disapproval, she opts for concealment. Leila needs to request time off for self care. But she is shamed by her supervisor for her request, and as a result silences herself. Through her supervisor's regular dismissal of Leila's loss, she is forced to engage in the dialectical tensions through disorientation, believing these tensions are inevitable and unchangeable.

Not every praxis of communication is dysfunctional. In segmentation, the subsequent tension I will discuss, a surviving sibling discerns when to talk about her loss depending on the setting or context of the conversation.

Segmentation. Segmentation is a higher functioning pattern of praxis by which surviving siblings approach tensions in a different manner, selecting specific times or situations or ways in which they disclose or discuss their loss. Earlier, I discussed disorientation, the less functioning pattern of praxis, engaged by Dee as a result of her instructor's response to her request for accommodation. While initially, she engages in disorientation, she then shifts to segmentation in a conversation with her psychology instructor. As a result, the less functional praxical pattern of disorientation is interrupted with the higher functioning pattern of praxis, segmentation.

When Dee discloses her loss to her psychology professor, he is accommodating and attempts to help her navigate the complex decisions that lie ahead for her. He suggests that she drop one of her three courses to reduce her work load, and he tells her he will accommodate her if she needs extensions. He also makes it clear that he understands if his class is the course she chooses to drop. He offers to connect Dee with the class teaching associate who has already been informed of her situation and is

prepared to assist her in any way she needs. His open response to Dee's disclosure helps her better make the necessary decisions. She states that his caring attitude was greatly appreciated. A surviving sibling's decision of whether or not to remain open with someone is often mediated by the other's response. Depending on the other's response, a surviving sibling may engage in praxis of segmentation or disorientation. In this case, we see a caring and thoughtful response to Dee's circumstances, and he does his best to help her navigate this unfamiliar territory and tension.

In praxis of segmentation, the setting is appropriate to talk about loss. Dee's self-boundary and praxical pattern of segmentation is present in the open-closed tension concerning disclosure. She states that should someone ask her something she does not want to answer, she tells them, "I don't want to talk about it." She also states there is an appropriate time and place to talk about grief, and class is not the time to talk about these issues. Furthermore, she asserts that it is clear that most professors do not know how to handle loss in the classroom, or what to say. As a result, she uses segmentation as a means to navigate when/where to talk about her brother's death.

In addition to segmentation, surviving siblings engage in compromise, also known as balance, which I will discuss next.

Balance. In balance, surviving siblings find compromise in the dialectical tensions and contradictions they experience. They strike a compromise in communication, engaging in a praxis of balance wherein tensions are "equal." It is not likely that tensions are ever totally balanced, but instead the parties engaged in dialectical interaction compromise.

Surviving siblings attempt to engage in patterns of praxis surrounding balance in connectedness-autonomy. For example, Cindie found balance in being connected to her friends and engaging in social events as she had in the past. However, the compromise is that, while she is being social, she navigates the tensions of loss by openly criticizing and speaking out against anyone engaged in drinking and driving, which includes awkward social settings. By finding her voice and by expressing her thoughts with others in social settings, both groups engage in balance. Through a praxical pattern of balance, she experiences connectedness with others while at the same time vocalizing her dislike for their behaviors. At this point, Cindie attends a candlelight vigil by herself. While engaging in a social outing, she is able to interact with others who are involved with MADD and also engage in her grief.

Lisa engages in a similar praxis of balance. While still engaging in social activities, she negotiates the dialectical tensions surrounding drunk driving and loss by refusing to associate with people engaged in that behavior. She articulates a moment when she is out with a group of friends. Someone accidentally discloses his recent DUI, and Lisa strikes a balance by confronting his behavior with her experience, showing her distaste for this behavior, while at the same time engaging in social activities.

This pattern of praxis, balance, is only temporary and involves more compromise than actual balance. While this praxis of communication is temporal, sharing tends to be a long term pattern of praxis. The more surviving siblings engage in this pattern of praxis, the better they seem to feel in communicative interactions. Sharing is high functioning.

Sharing. An emergent pattern of praxis in this research is sharing. That is, emergent adult surviving siblings found a way to change in their tensions through the praxical act of sharing their story. Neimeyer et al. (2008) find that “maintaining a connection with their loved one beyond death (through such means as cultivating memories, recording or sharing stories, or continuing the person’s legacy in the student’s own life) can be a constructive response to loss” (p. 36). Storytelling and personal narratives serve important roles in the grief process. Through this sharing, they are able to make meaning in their loss and therefore begin the healing process.

According Bosticco and Thompson (2005), “communication serves as a central function in grieving” (p. 274). It is through this praxical pattern of *sharing* that emergent adult surviving siblings are able to negotiate dialectical tensions surrounding their loss. Cindie attributes sharing her story as a large part of what saved her. At the four-year anniversary of her family’s death, she began telling her story on a victim impact panel monthly for MADD. She tells me that if it were not for that, she would have been dead due to the incredible grief she suffered. It is through sharing her loss with others that Cindie is better able to negotiate the complex dialectical tensions that couple her loss. While she is still autonomous in her loss, she finds connectedness with others in the process of sharing. It is in this praxical pattern of sharing that Cindie begins to navigate her way through the liminal space, toward an identity with which she is more comfortable.

Similarly, Linda also found sharing to be a beneficial means by which she can negotiate the dialectical tensions of her loss. When she worked for a substance abuse

clinic, she found that AA meetings were incredibly beneficial in her own healing because she was allowed to cry. She expresses appreciation and incredible relief that she's no longer "lying all the time" about her grief, "whereas for two years [she] lied all the time ... *all* the time." This permission to share allows Linda to remain open with her loss, rather than closed – although that openness is contextual, meaning it is specific to these meetings. Just as sharing helped Cindie move through the transition of liminality, Linda also experiences a shift in the liminal space by feeling free to be open and honest about who she is in this world – it is okay to disclose her loss. Similar to Cindie's experience Linda speaks on a victim impact panel for MADD twice per month – and has for the past 20 years. Here, she shares her experience of sibling loss surrounding drunk driving. When she initially signed up, it was with the understanding that she would only participate once. However, she found that sharing her story was incredibly healing for her. As a result, she continues to engage in this process. This sharing also allows her to focus on how, with time, she has moved through openness-closedness and autonomy-connectedness. It is through the praxical pattern of sharing that she successfully and functionally negotiates these tensions.

In negotiating the praxical pattern of sharing, some surviving siblings leave symbols or signs of their deceased sibling/family to arouse curiosity in others, leading to questions about family that then allow sharing to occur. Lisa has photographs of her family in the classroom in which she teaches, as well as on her laptop screensaver. When people ask her about her family in the photographs – which include her father and her brother – this serves as a way to navigate the open/closed tension and to engage in

sharing her story. Similarly, Leila has a tattoo on the inside of her wrist of her brother's initials. She finds that, just as the scholarship in her brother's name offers a way for her to talk about him, this tattoo also provides an opening for discussing her brother. She expresses a desire to share, to "just get it out there," and this provides a catharsis for that desire.

Through the praxis of sharing, surviving siblings find relief in their grief. They are able to make some sense of their loss and can begin to move through liminality, by way of dialectical tensions and the praxical pattern of sharing that they engage. In particular, Whisper's Mom shares with me that I am the first person she has talked to about her experience. In our second of three conversations, she tells me that she appreciated talking with me about her brother, and that this conversation helped her quite a bit. Renee tells me that the reason she did this interview in the first place was to help her find her voice in this loss, and to help her communicate about it and figure out – aloud – how she feels about things. The value of sharing as a praxical pattern in dialectical theory is clearly a move toward positive change.

* * *

I sit in a professional development session where we receive hypothetical situations to discuss. One scenario, in particular, strikes a chord. We are to imagine that we are teaching a debate class. The day before a major debate will take place in class, the instructor (me, in this case) receives an email explaining that a student in this class has committed suicide. It is late in the semester, and students in this class have bonded and formed close relationships. We share how we think we would respond as instructors.

I am excited, as this is my area of interest – grief communication. What do we do, as instructors, when we receive news like this? I immediately raise my hand and share my response: Regardless of the inconvenience, I would stop class and do whatever necessary to invite students to grieve and come to terms with the loss. I would open up communication about this loss and model responsible behavior surrounding grief communication. I would be sure to have someone from counseling services present, prepared to respond and ready to provide information for students in need of additional resources. While my verbal response is short, my internal thought process is complex.

Many participants in this session agree, but one does not. He shares with the class that this loss is none of his business and that he would not feel comfortable bringing it up with the students. Instead, he would conduct class as usual, as this is an issue that affects life outside of the classroom. This is someone I respect, whose teaching style I imagine will be quite effective. I am surprised at his response. My heart sinks. In my mind, I think about my retort, my passionate response and the ensuing argument between “real life” and the classroom – that there really is no separation of the two. What happens beyond the classroom walls, in the lives of these students, affects the environment in the immediate classroom. But instead I sit silently, afraid to voice my opposition to this approach. I wonder, as I return home that evening, at my hesitation, at my self-censoring approach to the discussion. Why did I silence myself and my opinion?

Caught between open and closed, I do as other siblings do and I engage in segmentation. As Dee said there is a time and a place and school is not one of them, I engage in this as well. I do not agree with it, yet I’m not sure how to break this mold, and

in that moment of dialectical tension, I engage in a pattern of segmentation, and instead choose to discuss the dilemma privately with a friend later that evening.

* * *

As I move to close this chapter, I hope this work serves to illuminate the different dialectical tensions surviving siblings in emergent adulthood experience. I also hope this work calls out the role the liminal space plays in this type of loss, as well as the relationship liminality has with dialectical theory.

Earlier in this chapter, I discuss my body's physical response to each participant interview; I feel nervous and anxious prior to each interview; I feel hyper with anticipation. Yet after each interview, I feel an incredible sense of calm, of accomplishment and of happiness. These conversations yield incredible information that not only lends to grief communication, but that also heals me. I believe it also heals the participants a little bit. The participants tell me they enjoy speaking with another surviving sibling about sibling loss. After each interview, I walk away excitedly anticipating the next conversation I will have with a surviving sibling. Each conversation works to heal me bit by bit. A few surviving siblings also share with me that retelling their experience is also cathartic for them. While these conversations dredge up the emotion and pain we long to forget, there is also a healing component to this work.

In this chapter, I have worked to illuminate the experiences of surviving siblings in emergent adulthood whose siblings are killed in drunk driving crashes. In the subsequent chapter, Chapter 5, I will work to tie this work together by discussing the specific research questions, highlighting the unique challenges posed in this study,

making suggestions for future research, as well as discussing dialectical theory and liminality and their application to this work.

CHAPTER 5: Moving Forward with Grief

Drunk drivers live, victims die – why? 'Cause they tense up.

“Remember to go limp when you fall,” my instructor yells over the “thump” of bodies being tossed over the shoulder and to the rubber mats on the floor. We are learning how to fall without injuring ourselves today.

I am in my kickboxing class. I signed up last semester after the crash. I take this class at my local community college, and I enjoy the workouts.

We stand in lines of six with one person at the front of each line; that person practices throwing each person in the line. After a person is thrown, they move to the end of the line; and this continues throughout 3-minute intervals. At the end of the 3-minute intervals, we switch throwers and the previous thrower goes to the end of the line, waiting for his or her turn to *be* thrown.

“Okay...” yells the instructor. “Remember that when you’re being thrown down, you need to relax. Why do you go limp? Here’s an example: Drunk drivers that cause car accidents – what happens? They walk away. Who dies? The sober people. Why? Because when you’re drunk, your body is relaxed. The sober drivers tense up. What happens when you tense up? You injure yourself.”

I look around and see the looks of students around me. The example has not phased them, but instead has helped in clarifying a complex point in the class. Drunk drivers walk away because they relax, and the victims usually die because they’re tense. All I can think about is was Kari stiff and scared when the crash occurred? Did she see it

coming and freak out? Now I feel sick. I don't want to be in class anymore, but I'm here ... letting my body go limp each time I'm thrown to the ground.

* * *

Chapter 4 provides valuable insight into the experiences of emergent adult siblings whose siblings were killed in drunk driving crashes. In the following chapter, I will suggest recommendations for surviving siblings, instructors and supervisors, and for institutions and professional organizations. I hope to illuminate the value of my methodological approach, as well as discuss my application of dialectical tensions and liminality in this study. I will also highlight new insights into dialectical theory and liminality. Finally, I will discuss some of the unique challenges I faced as a researcher in this study, as well as suggest recommendations for future research.

Implications

There are many implications of this study. The implications that emerged in this research point to institutions, organizations, instructors, employers/supervisors, and surviving siblings. To foster clarity, I have broken each section into its own category for more in-depth discussion. First, I will discuss how the findings herein apply and implicate academic and professional institutions when we talk about grief. Second, I will discuss suggestions and recommendations for instructors and supervisors. Third, I will speak to surviving siblings in terms of how this work is of use to them. Each of these implications is situated within the discipline of communication. After discussing implications, I will highlight the collaborative nature of interviews and autoethnography. I will then discuss the application of dialectics and liminality in this study. I will touch

on some of the challenges I faced in this study, as well as my recommendations for future research. Finally, I will close with a narrative highlighting my recent experience in the classroom as a surviving sibling, instructor, and student. First, I will discuss the implications for both academic and organizational institutions.

Institutions: academic and organizational. Academic and organizational institutions should review their respective support systems in place for grief support. There is a dearth of grief communication training in human resources and student services. In this research, we see varying experiences of surviving siblings that depend very much on the support and feedback they receive from those in authority. According to Balk (2008), “At any given time, 22 to 30 percent of college undergraduates are in the first twelve months of grieving the death of a family member or friend” (p. 5). As a result of this high number of students grieving on college campuses at a given time, it is critical that we view grief communication as an integral component of the college experience.

From an academic standpoint, Dee provides good examples of both strengths and weaknesses on the part of her university. Her university already had a network of support in place, and it was this group that helped her navigate the complex academic system, while at the same time navigating her grief. This service provided help for Dee, which is wonderful. In Dee’s case, she had the help of her mother to reach out to the appropriate campus resources. Surviving siblings who do not have the support of family to locate campus resources are of concern. What would have happened if Dee’s mother did not reach out to an on-campus service like this one? Her instructors did not guide her in that

direction. It important that institutions provide crisis and grief communication training for instructors, so those instructors, to whom Dee reached out, might point her in a direction that can further assist her and help her navigate her way through her loss, as a surviving sibling/college student. I'll talk more about instructor responsibility and accountability in the following section.

Institutions should have grief communication counseling services specific to *violent* loss. According to Vickio (2008), violent loss may cause grief, as well as trauma (p. 48). Grief can include “shock, numbness, and disbelief; difficulty acknowledging the reality of what has occurred; alternating between confrontation and avoidance of stimuli; violation of fundamental beliefs; and irritability and anger” (Vickio, 2008, p. 2008). However, trauma can go on to include more severe symptoms as well, which, according to the American Psychiatric Association (2000) manifest as “heightened physiological reactivity; a pronounced sense of endangerment; hypervigilance; fragmented, intrusive images; and dissociation” (cited in Vickio, 2008, p. 48). This points to a need for academic institutions to instill protocol for students negotiating violent loss, like drunk driving, as the symptoms of grief may move into trauma.

The college environment provides a rich environment to provide education surrounding grief communication. The academic environment is where we can begin to pave a path for *talking* about loss, for *disclosing* loss, for remaining open rather than closed. Vickio (2008) recommends on-campus grief workshops for interested students and faculty. According to Vickio (2008), these workshops provide “a conceptual framework for understanding” loss, normalize and legitimize “grief-related thoughts and

feelings,” enable interaction “with other bereaved individuals ... thereby [feeling] less isolated by their grief experience,” helps the grieving “identify options for coping with grief,” and directs “students to other resources” (p. 42). Communication is an integral component of any grief workshop, which is why I argue for workshops surrounding *grief communication*. How do we *talk* about grief in society? Where do we go, on campus, when a student is coping with violent loss? What resources currently exist?

Communication must be integrated into grief workshops as a backbone in the healing and sense-making process. I suggest workshops geared toward instructors who want to learn *how* to approach grief when it confronts them, as well as workshops specific to students in grief. It is up to academic institutions to implement these. I hosted a grief communication workshop with my colleague in Fall 2009, and found this space to be tremendously beneficial for students. In this workshop, we talked about *talking about* grief, and we discussed the challenges we face in grief negotiation.

There is potential to provide an environment, both academically and organizationally, for emergent adults grieving the loss of their sibling (particularly, the loss of a sibling to a violent loss like drunk driving), to better negotiate the dialectical tensions they experience, as well as to work through the liminal process toward a new, evolved identity in which they are more comfortable. This requires a concerted effort that moves us away from praxical patterns of disorientation where talking about loss is simply not possible – nor will it be – and toward higher functioning patterns of praxis, like segmentation, balance and sharing.

Just as academic institutions need more structured support for different types of grief, so too do professional institutions. It is important to understand the manifestations of violent loss in the workplace in order to accommodate employees who experience grief. In particular, professional organizations need to spend the time and effort in training those in human resources, as well as those in a supervisory capacity, with grief communication skills.

Leila articulates a desire to see similar programs in place for employees during times of grief. She expresses frustration at the fact that organizations provide extensive training for people who are underperforming, but there is no training for loss-related stress in the workplace. She found it very difficult to handle the reactions of her supervisors and coworkers when she told them what happened. She felt isolated alone, and when one is expected to put in ten hours per day in an office environment, a lack of support can be devastating for a surviving sibling. Leila needed a support system at work, but instead found herself regularly shamed and silenced. When she did reach out for help, her supervisor did not provide any sort of suggestions or guidance, other than seeking outside help. It would have been beneficial for her supervisor to sit down with Leila to discuss her needs in addition to the organization's needs. Because her supervisor treated her work performance and her loss as two unrelated issues, Leila feels forced to remain closed toward her loss. Even something as simple as, "I'm sorry for your loss" may have sufficed, but even that was left unsaid. As a result, Leila felt completely alone and marginalized in her grief at work.

In her own attempt to foster organizational change, Leila filled out an exit survey when she left the company:

I filled out an online survey like an exit interview type thing for that job; in one of the comments sections, I actually suggested that they provide training to supervisors and managers on how to deal with employees who are working with grief. And whether or not they do anything with that, I have no idea. I don't think I'm ever going to hear anything, but it felt good to at least bring that up.

Leila's suggestion mirrors my own. In addition to all of the other training organizations provide, they need to also provide grief training. It is possible that Leila's supervisor had no prior experience with grief in the workplace. Training may have facilitated a smoother transition for Leila, as well as a smoother work environment for Leila, her supervisor and her coworkers, who clearly did not know how to respond. This leads to the next section, which discusses implications for instructors and supervisors, and how training in grief communication would lend to healthier patterns among these parties.

Instructors and supervisors. Instructors and supervisors have a responsibility to foster an environment that is open toward grief. As instructors, we come in contact with our students more often than any other member of academia (with the exception of RAs) (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). By providing instructors with grief communication training, we can better “respond to bereaved students effectively” (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008, p. 51). Often, we feel compelled to keep our grief to ourselves, and we encourage others to grieve privately. Shuler (2007) articulates the pain felt throughout the university when her colleague, and friend, was killed in a car crash. Shuler (2007) is disappointed to hear “how many of [her] friends did not share their sense of loss with their students” (p. 275). Shuler (2007) asks the question, “Why do many of us conform

to professional dictates of emotional labor so well that we can't be human beings to our students?" (p. 275). This begs further investigation into the decision of disclosing death and loss, of better understanding when it is socially appropriate to talk about death in the classroom, as well as beyond. Because instructors felt it was irrelevant to their students, they chose to withhold this information. But at a certain point, it may be part of a larger schemata, part of the "big picture," to talk about loss; to acknowledge the pain; to move through the socially taboo topic of death; to lead by example; to model for students that is okay to talk about death; that it is okay to hurt, to be human.

Yet there seems to be a lack of support from instructors when it comes to communicating loss. In a college environment, substance abuse is common, as is the issue of alcohol abuse and drunk driving. Surviving siblings who have experienced their loss to a drunk driver are negotiating many, complex tensions surrounding their loss, and often need guidance in moving in an academically "right" direction. Dee utilized valuable campus resources available to her. Without Dee's mother reaching out to the campus peer counselors, Dee may have never received the help she needed. When she told her professors about her experience, it may have been beneficial for them to provide her with the information about campus resources she so desperately needed. Once aware of her circumstances, she shouldn't have to ask her instructor for help. By openly discussing her loss, instructors may have been better prepared to address Dee's loss.

I argue that instructors have an obligation to know their campus resources and to have basic training in grief communication. If 22 – 30 percent of college students are in bereavement (i.e., Balk, 2008), it seems relevant that instructors would receive basic

training in “skills and strategies for interacting with bereaved students” (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008, p. 53).

When an instructor faces a student who is exhibiting possible signs of bereavement, Servaty-Seid and Taub (2008) recommend the following actions: “observe and inquire” into students whose grades suddenly drop in your course (p. 54). If you notice a significant change in the coursework of a student, you might check in with him or her to let that student know you are concerned for her/his wellbeing and that you are a resource to them if s/he needs help. *Listen* when your student approaches you and shares his or her loss with you, and be prepared to take the time to talk with her/him (Servaty-Seid & Taub, 2008, p. 54). In addition, instructors should use validating statements that honor, rather than ignore students’ loss; something as simple as “I am here for you” can facilitate an open versus closed interaction with your student (Servaty-Seid & Taub, 2008, p. 54).

Instructors should offer “tangible support” (Servaty-Seid & Taub, 2008, p. 54). When a student approaches you after experiencing a loss, it is in your best interest as an instructor to treat her/his situation delicately and with compassion. For example, if the student is unable to complete his or her class work for a period of time, you might work with that student on deadlines, or you may offer an incomplete in your class, as “bereaved students who are in the acute stages of grief, struggling with symptoms such as concentration problems, insomnia and somatic concerns” may experience significant challenges in focusing on academics (Servaty-Seid & Taub, 2008, p. 54).

Finally, instructors *must* know their existing campus resources for students. When a student approaches you with information you are not comfortable discussing, rather than invalidating or refusing to accommodate students, *refer* them to the appropriate on-campus resources (Servaty-Seid & Taub, 2008, p. 54). As instructors, we are obligated to care for our students as human beings. While our primary role is to teach, it is important to remember that, beyond the material in our lessons, teaching also occurs in our communicative interactions. Just as Servaty-Seid and Taub (2008) suggest instructors know their campus resources, I suggest that instructors need to know their grief communication. If we can have more uniformity concerning grief communication, then students in bereavement will receive a more consistent message and have a better idea of the resources and options that are available to them. Next, I will discuss implications for emerging adult surviving siblings who lost their sibling to a drunk driving-related crash.

Surviving siblings in emergent adulthood. Openness/closedness and connectedness/autonomy: This is a big dilemma for surviving siblings in emergent adulthood. The bottom line is that loss is taboo and as surviving siblings, we tend to feel uncomfortable discussing it. Whether you are uncomfortable, or whether you simply perceive others as feeling uncomfortable, effective navigation of the dialectical tensions that are inherent in grief communication is a central component on which we need more focus. One thing that is very clear in the dialectical interaction with others: You are not guiding the tensions, but rather you are allowing others to guide the tensions in your conversations surrounding loss. However, there are cases where you are outspoken and

choose to take the risk of remaining open. Often times, it is the person with whom we speak who initiates a particular pattern of praxis within a dialectical tension, and we accept what we receive and run with it.

It is clear that, as surviving siblings in emergent adulthood, we benefit by discussing loss, but that benefit comes at a significant risk. It is simply not possible for us to be open all the time, or the risk of hurt is significant. As a result, the open-closed tension is here to stay, but we have the power to make a choice in how we negotiate dialectical tensions. In Leila's case, we see her attempt to be open with her supervisor; however, she is shamed and feels othered at work as a result of her openness. This experience results in her shutting down and remaining closed; she is engaged in a praxical pattern of disorientation. This retreat to closedness moves her toward a feeling of otherness where discussion of her experience is not only discouraged, but silenced altogether. Although Leila does find her voice in her exit interview where she recommends change on behalf of the organization – she suggests they implement training surrounding grief in the workplace, which is an excellent and well-intentioned suggestion.

Similarly, Dee found herself in a position where she felt unsure as to whether she should remain open to her loss with professors or closed. She felt that disclosing her loss may be an excuse, and that she should be treated as everyone else. It is imperative that surviving siblings recognize their position as unique – that of all the struggles we may face as humans, we allow ourselves to communicate our loss, and to negotiate the

dialectical tensions we experience in a healthy – sometimes open, sometimes closed – manner.

Just as Renee and Whisper's Mom expressed their appreciation of communicating their loss, Lisa expressed a desire to share and communicate more in her grieving process. Linda discussed the benefit that sharing had on her experience of grief, as did Cindie. The biggest indicator here is the ability to *share*, which I discussed at length in chapter four. As surviving siblings, when you have the opportunity to share the experience of losing your brothers and sisters, as well as mothers and fathers, to a drunk driver, you are better able to reflect on how this experience shapes and changes you. When your identity is in flux and when you're feeling lost and without direction, it is important that you talk to someone. Unfortunately, it is not always safe to open up to your instructor, nor is it always safe to reach out to colleagues or supervisors. I call for institutions – both academic and professional – as well as instructors and supervisors to engage in grief communication training. However, until they do, it is good to explore your options as surviving siblings. You can reach out to counseling services for private sessions, and you might also explore the campus-wide support groups already in place. If there is no support group for the bereaved, then you should ask your campus's counseling center to consider starting one, as this provides a space for you to meet other surviving siblings who are negotiating similar tensions. Additionally, services like MADD provide much needed support for survivors of drunk driving crashes and their families.

The praxical act of sharing does intersect with segmentation, as there are certain times where disclosing loss is simply not possible. As surviving siblings who have lost

siblings to drunk driving crashes, I encourage you to explore the tensions you experience in communication. What do those tensions look like and how do they feel? Who is it that is negotiating the dialectics in that tension and what praxical pattern of communication are you engaging? Sharing in this type of grief communication is so important. If there is one, central message I hope surviving siblings will receive, it is that they should talk about their experience with someone they can trust. It might be someone in an institutional or private setting. However, as we co-construct meaning, and as we evolve into our new identities, we can make sense out of the contradictions and change *through* the process of communication. Just as the stories of these surviving siblings proved instrumental in this work, my own story helped me make sense of this work. Through autoethnography, I found a valuable space of inquiry in the communication discipline. Surviving siblings' personal narratives provided insight into areas where we need better, more effective communication. Next, I will discuss the value of interviews and autoethnography in this work, and how these two methods are a collaborative process.

Interviews and Autoethnography as Collaborative Revisited

The autoethnographic approach allowed me to voice my own positionality and experience as both a researcher and participant in this study. At this point in my academic career, I could not engage in this work without including my own voice in this work. In part, this stems from the limited access I have to participants as a researcher. Additionally, my experience with this specific type of loss is what guided the direction of this work. Goodall (2004) writes, "Communication, as a field of study, as a collection of

life stories we give to the world, needs to address a broader public audience. To do this, we need to communicate our research to new audiences in a language they understand. Otherwise, we will have succeeded only in writing ourselves out of the marketplace of ideas” (p. 190). Through this autoethnographic account, I invite academic and professional institutions, instructors and supervisors and surviving siblings into a glimpse of the common attitudes surrounding surviving siblings in emergent adulthood and drunk driving. While this research matters within the field of communication, it must be accessible to those beyond this field for us to make a difference.

Identifying the most appropriate theory for this topic was a challenge, as this subject is so rich and – as of yet – virtually untouched in the field of communication. As a result, there were many theories I could draw on, but by reflecting on my own experience, as well as exploring the work already completed in communication studies, I was better able to call out dialectical theory as that which best supports this particular research.

My own experience also guided my interaction with participants. After each interview, I opened the discussion to draw in my own experience. Participants could ask any questions they liked about my own loss. Each participant wanted to discuss my loss and my experience. There is a healing power involved in hearing the stories of others – to know how others have coped with their loss. And I, too, have healed and evolved in this work. In addition, it is critical that I incorporate my own voice throughout this work, in an autoethnographic manner, to ensure I am engaging in self-reflexive practices. Without acknowledging and reflecting on my own experience during these interviews, I

leave out a critical component – the lens through which I see. I see through the lens of a surviving sibling, a graduate student, a scholar; I see through the lens of someone whose family was killed by a drunk driver. This is important to disclose when working on a topic intertwined with my own experience. I would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to take an objective stance on this subject. My personal experience with this topic made autoethnography a logical and appropriate choice.

By engaging in autoethnographic research, partnered with interviewing, this study is well rounded and inclusive of a variety of voices – eight voices, to be exact: seven participants and my own. These interviews and my own experience with sibling loss gave way to different overarching dialectical tensions, as well as a better understanding of the relationship liminality has with these tensions. I will discuss the application of dialectical tensions and liminality in this research in the following section.

Application of Dialects and Liminality

This work functions to explore extant research on dialectical tensions in the field of communication, as well as to uncover new areas and directions; in particular, this study illuminates the intersection of liminality and dialectical theory in a way I have not previously seen. First, I will discuss the tensions I anticipated in this research versus the tensions that actually manifested in this work. Next, I will highlight the areas that reinforce the work of other members of academia. Finally, I will discuss previously unexplored tensions that this study serves to highlight.

At the outset of this study, I anticipated the following tensions to manifest: presence-absence; openness-closedness; connectedness-autonomy; and certainty-

uncertainty. Out of the four dialectical tensions I expected, two of these emerged in conversation with surviving siblings: openness-closedness and connectedness-autonomy. It is noteworthy that these tensions are not mutually exclusive, but leak into one another. They coexist in a tangled and messy web of contradiction and tension. I will discuss the implications of these tensions.

The dialectical tension, openness-closedness, is a tension that has been previously researched, discussed and affirmed by grief communication scholars. Each participant in this study experiences her own relationship with openness-closedness, depending on the “four dialogues of the utterance chain” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 29). In this utterance chain, the speaker moves through a sequence of internal processes that lead to specific statements. Specifically, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) highlight four stages a speaker moves through: “already-spoken utterances from the distant past” to “already-spoken utterances of the immediate conversation” to “anticipated response of the superaddressee” and finally to the “anticipated response of the addressee” (p. 29). Based on this chain of utterances, surviving siblings decide whether to remain closed or open about their loss. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) defer to Bakhtin’s definition “superaddressee” as the societal norms surrounding a particular issue. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) provide this example: “When a person contemplates saying “I love you” for the first time to a given partner, he or she anticipates whether such a declaration is considered appropriate within the broader societal conventions” (p. 28). We may apply this same notion to disclosing loss – is this disclosure appropriate on a societal level?

Just as surviving siblings in emergent adulthood feel the pull between openness and closedness, bereaved parents also feel that same pull. Toller (2005) discusses how bereaved parents pull between openness and closedness in determining whether to disclose loss (p. 46). Bereaved parents opt out of disclosure “when talking about the death result[s] in feelings of judgment” (Toller, 2005, p. 54). I anticipated similar reasoning on behalf of surviving siblings, but as it turns out, the decision to remain closed stems from a desire to make those around them comfortable. Dee, Linda, and Leila all discuss their concern of being open about their loss. By talking about the death of their siblings, they risk making others uncomfortable. Leila did risk (and experience) judgment by being open about her loss; however, the two overarching reasons for moving toward closedness stems from the unwillingness to make others uncomfortable, as well as a need for self-protection.

Building on this desire to make those around them comfortable, surviving siblings struggle with a seemingly innocent question. “Do you have any siblings?” I correctly anticipated that this would be a tricky question for surviving siblings in emergent adulthood, struggling with dialectical tensions in a liminal state. As Hastings (2000) questions, “if your only child dies, are you still a mother?” (p. 352). What I found is that surviving siblings still very much view themselves as their deceased siblings’ sisters. However, as I also forecasted, each sibling answers this question differently, at different times, and with different people. The responses siblings provide also depends on the four dialogues of the utterance chain (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 29). For example, Lisa discusses her brother as still being alive when her second grade students ask her about

him. She tells them that he is her 16-year-old brother. He passed away when he was fourteen, but she chooses to engage the tension and respond as if he were still alive today. However, if someone who is closer to her age asks her, she does disclose her loss. But there are qualifiers in her decision of how or when to disclose. When she first meets someone, she prefers to wait to disclose her loss, as she doesn't want that to be the primary thing the other person remembers about her. Once she gets to know someone, she feels more comfortable sharing her, though she still allows the other person to bring it up in conversation.

In order to negotiate the liminal state surviving siblings experience with dialectical tensions, communication is critical. Hastings (2000) finds that "conversation is the primary vehicle through which identity is constructed, contested, and negotiated," which means that our "identity becomes the product of the social process" (p. 357). If surviving siblings remain closed, if they are silenced in their loss, then they risk limbo, existing in a perpetual liminal space. This relationship between liminality and dialectics is important in grief communication, as surviving siblings experience his or her identity crisis. As a sibling for many years, this surviving sibling faces redeveloping his or her identity in this world as the surviving sibling, without the presence of his or her sibling. As surviving siblings negotiate their new role in this world, without their brothers and sisters who helped define them, they are left in a space of liminality, and it is the praxis of dialectical tensions that help them make sense and work their way through the liminal space. Liminality in loss associated with drunk driving, among emergent adults and for

surviving siblings, leaves much room for future research. Next, I will discuss challenges, future research and my final thoughts in this work.

Challenges and Final Thoughts

My own experience as a surviving sibling in emergent adulthood serves as both an advantage and challenge in this work. It is my own experience with sibling loss that helped me gain access to the community of emergent adult siblings who lost their siblings to drunk drivers. The challenge in this work has been to know when, as an interviewer, I could disclose my own experience with the interviewee. I also needed to be sure that my disclosure/vocalized understanding did not unintentionally silence participants. When I say, “Yes, I understand,” am I unknowingly silencing a participant? Am I cutting her off from sharing an insight? This proved a challenge. I did my best to elicit more information from participants concerning certain phenomena surrounding their individual losses.

Future research might review power structures in place – both as instructors and supervisors – that determine openness-closedness among surviving siblings. Power relationships and perceived hierarchal structures may lead surviving siblings in emergent adulthood to negotiate dialectical tensions and liminality very differently across both instructional and organizational contexts. In my conversations with surviving siblings, participants broached next steps.

By providing training, supervisors may avoid awkward interactions with siblings who simply need support, understanding and guidance in navigating the corporate and academic rules and regulations. It is possible that Leila’s supervisor was not purposely

“cold-hearted,” but instead was uncomfortable and unsure of how to approach this subject. As a result, the supervisor’s response was to (un)intentionally silence Leila, moving her toward closed in the openness-closedness tension. This moved Leila toward strong feelings of resentment and a resulting lack of communication, as Leila did not feel safe or welcome to be open with her loss at work.

Stigma and self-censorship/disclosure also begs further inquiry into self-disclosure that concerns opposing stigmatized identities. For example, a college-aged sibling who has lost his or her sibling to a drunk driver may encounter a peer who has received a DUI, which is also a stigmatized identity. I am interested in exploring how surviving siblings negotiate these opposing stigmatized identities. In negotiating a stigmatized identity marked with tensions, narrative may serve an important function in grief communication.

Future work might also focus on issues and relationships between power and dialectical tensions. How do power relationships define the negotiation of dialectical tensions among surviving siblings in emergent adulthood? When someone in a perceived position of power, like an instructor or supervisor, is hesitant to broach such a powerful topic, how does that affect the surviving sibling’s ability to disclose or remain open to loss? A concerted study surrounding loss in the workplace may be beneficial and provide insight for organizations into the types of support and resources they need in order to accommodate grief in the workplace.

Future research may also work to explore the relationship and intersection of dialectical tensions and liminal “situations” as outlined by Turner (1969). This work

might move toward an understanding of how the space of liminality opens up room for dialectical tensions to take place due to uncertainty of identity and new roles/expectations.

My idealistic hope was that, by the end of this thesis, I would have concrete answers that function to help surviving siblings, that work to provide understanding for instructors and well-meaning individuals, and that provide guidance for academic and organizational institutions. Unfortunately, I bring this thesis to a close on a rather unsettling note with a look toward the future. There are no easy, straightforward answers to be found here. However, it is critical that we explore and analyze the systematic silencing surviving siblings in emergent adulthood experience. Why do these siblings resist feeling different? Even in crisis, surviving siblings adhere to standards of normalcy. From where or whom does this silencing come? Who reinforces this? Is it on a societal level or on a case-by-case basis? When death is the one inevitable circumstance we will all face, why do we resist talking about it?

My belief is that this shift in communication must begin in academia, where we receive education, where instructors model behavior, where societal norms and expectations may begin to shift and to take shape in a positive direction. It is up to us as surviving siblings, instructors, organizational leaders and academic institutions, to take an active role in changing the silencing that currently takes place surrounding sibling loss in emergent adulthood. As we move forward with grief communication, society as a whole must begin the shift from a system of silence to one of open and productive grief communication. My hope is that this thesis functions to illuminate this need.

I close this work with two narratives that accurately capture the essence of who I am today as a student, employee, instructor, sister, surviving sibling, and daughter. While these narratives provide hope, they also point to the unsettling nature of this work. Grief is “a state of being rather than an event: it has no temporal boundaries, neither a clear beginning nor a welcome end, and no spatial ones, no sharp, arid places where it is wholly absent from my feel for the terrain ... grief is something that immerses you once your loved one dies, and the feel of the droplets lays on your skin, hangs from your lips, drips into your eyes, refracting your experience of the world in unforeseeable ways indefinitely after” (Nainby & Pea, 2003, pp. 32-33). When we are in grief, we are in process. It is our praxis of dialectical tensions that helps us navigate through liminal spaces and toward our shifting identities as surviving siblings. These narratives help to show how I have engaged in my own praxis of dialectical tensions, and how I have come to accept my identity as a sibling, and as a surviving sibling. At times, these identities work *with* my academic and professional selves, rather than against them.

Instructor and Student: Engaging Tension in the Classroom

October 2010. It is Monday evening, and I am teaching public speaking. I am a graduate teaching associate in the Department of Communication Studies. We finish identifying themes for our speeches, and we move on to specific topic selection. Students are announcing their topic to the class they think of it. So far we have different propositions on the ballot, budget cuts in the CSU system, smoking on campus, campus safety, and hybrid vehicles. The task is to come up with a topic that can be both informative and persuasive. One of the students raises his hand.

“What is your topic selection, Ivan?”

“Drunk driving,” he says.

“Well that is an interesting topic,” I respond, “which theme does it fit under? Safety, legal issues?”

“No,” he says, “I’m thinking more, like, how to do it and not get caught.” As he stares at me, I negotiate this tension, doing my best to navigate the possible patterns of praxis. Oh god – do I engage disorientation, segmentation, balance? I hear snickers from other students. I think of all the other times I have overheard others joke about drunk driving and DUIs, about all the people who take it lightly. I think about how, in the past, I may have ignored this comment. I also remember how it felt as a student to hear an instructor disregard or dismiss violence like this. In this moment, I engage in praxis of sharing.

I proceed with caution, but I also throw caution to the wind as I prepare to disclose my experience with loss and drunk driving.

“Well I think that is an interesting idea, Ivan. But I would ask you to engage in audience analysis before approaching your audience with this topic. For example, what you don’t know about me is that when I was 20 years old, and a college student, a drunk driver killed my father and my sister. So I would feel pretty offended by that topic choice. Does it mean you can’t talk about it? Not necessarily – although it is illegal to drink and drive. But I do ask that you take a good look at how you are approaching it.”

As I speak, I am excited by my body’s response. Rather than becoming pale, bright red, clammy, or shaky, I feel very calm and collected. However, I do see his face

turn pale, and I see that he is uncomfortable. I try to navigate this exchange in a way that is productive both for Ivan, who is likely unaware of the power of his words, as well as for the rest of the class. I speak in a way that suggests it is okay that he raised this – in fact, it was good. If we don't talk about these issues, then how will we know any different?

The entire class looks uncomfortable, and some look at me sympathetically. However, instead of hiding from this, we engage in a conversation. “This is not to put you on the spot or to make you feel bad, Ivan. I'm glad you suggested this because this provides us with a good opportunity to talk about how we can approach ‘tough to talk about issues’ in front of an adverse audience.”

Even as I say these things, I can see that this has affected him. But instead of feeling guilt, as I may have in the past, I feel proud and excited that I broke my silence and attempted to engage in praxis of dialectical tensions that served me, Ivan and the rest of the class in a moment of learning and personal growth. As we move on with topics, more students begin to contribute ideas surrounding substance abuse: safe drinking, legal procedures of DUIs, substance abuse issues in college. While I should be happy to hear interest in these topics, I can't help but recognize these as being informed by the recent discussion. Rather than for their own benefit, I fear the students are pandering to a story I told, trying to make the teacher happy (which is another thesis entirely). While I hope it is because they truly view these topics as critical, I am insecure.

After class, Ivan approaches me, “Professor, I am so sorry. I feel really bad. I'll be purely professional from this point forward.”

“Ivan, I really don’t want you to beat yourself up here.” He looks genuinely distressed, and I feel guilty. “This was one of those moments where it was appropriate to talk about audience analysis, as I know you were not the only person out there thinking about a sensitive topic.” I try to convey that he need not feel guilty or uncomfortable.

As I leave class, I feel a weight lifted. I am excited, free. I truly feel like I accomplished something in class. This was a moment where I successfully negotiated the openness-closedness tension in praxis that served to move me forward in communicating loss.

* * *

I am so excited that I go home and immediately tell my mother what happened.

“Mom, guess what???”

As I tell her about this experience she says to me, “I’m proud of you, honey. That’s great.”

“Thanks Mom.”

Then she asks me, “you know what?”

“What?”

“When you got up in that courtroom and gave that guy a piece of your mind, when you spoke in that courtroom, you articulated your feelings toward him so well...”

“Yes...”

“Well, I think you were already on your path to this work in communication. It took you a while to get here, but you were always headed in this direction. This is important work. I am so proud of you.”

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Originally, I planned to end on this note; on the successful experience of a surviving sibling navigating dialectical tensions in the classroom. However, the story is incomplete.

The following week, I sit in class, prepared for two-and-a-half hours of speeches. As the speeches progress, there are two presentations about the dangers of drunk driving. While I appreciate the slant of the topic, I can't say I am thrilled, as I feel as if my loss is now marking me. It is clear these speeches are designed with last week's admission in mind. Finally, it is Ivan's turn to speak. As he begins his presentation, I realize that he has not changed his topic. I proceed to sit and listen to a seven-minute presentation about how one does not get caught drunk driving. He stares directly at me, and I make a conscious choice not to change my facial expression – I maintain the same facial expression for his presentation as I do for all the others. I hear him tell the audience that, “while it is not good to drink and drive, sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we just *have* to because of strange circumstances.” It is all I can do to not roll my eyes. I can see he is avoiding direct eye contact with me – until the very end, at which point he looks at me and says, “Now, I'm not advocating drunk driving, but I think it's really important that you know what your rights are when you're pulled over.”

It is official. I've failed as an instructor, and I've failed as an advocate who is against drunk driving. Did I push him into the speech because I *didn't* say, “No, absolutely not”? Or is this his stubbornness and strong belief that we should all be aware of how to engage in drunk driving and not get caught? Either way, after his presentation,

the audience claps, and he sits down. I don't address his topic even though I know I should. I don't have the courage to go there now that they all know about my personal story. I am in disbelief.

This points to the ever-shifting praxical patterns of communication and to the temporal nature of dialectical tensions. One day, I am a confident surviving sibling who confronts a student on his bad speech topic (a bad topic that really hits home). The next day, I'm an instructor who doesn't know how to respond to this blatant display of disregard. I wonder what in the hell I'm doing here, engaged in this work, if I didn't have the courage to confront my student. But then I remember that grief is a process, as are dialectical tensions. And I think of my mother's words: "You were already on your path to this work in communication. It took you a while to get here, but you were always headed in this direction. This is important work. I am so proud of you." This moves me forward.

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APPENDIX A: Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY	<p>To: Krista Nilsen</p> <p>From: Pamela Stacks, Ph.D. Associate Vice President Graduate Studies and Research</p> <p>Date: March 1, 2010</p> <p>The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:</p> <p>“Dialectical Tensions among College-Aged Surviving Siblings Who Have Lost a Sibling to a Drunk Driver”</p> <p>This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the confidentiality of the subjects’ identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Dr. Pamela Stacks, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subject’s portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond March 1, 2011 requires an extension request.</p> <p>Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject’s participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.</p> <p>If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2427.</p> <p>Protocol #S1002048</p> <p>cc. Deanna. Fassett 0112</p>
<p>Division of Academic Affairs Associate Vice President Graduate Studies & Research www.sjsu.edu/gradstudies</p> <p>One Washington Square San José, California 95192-0025 Voice: 408-924-2427 Fax: 408-924-2612 www.sjsu.edu</p>	
<small>The California State University: Chancellor's Office Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico, Dominguez Hills, East Bay, Fresno, Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo, San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus</small>	

APPENDIX B – Agreement to Participate in Research

San José State
UNIVERSITY

College of Social Sciences
Department of Communication
Studies

One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0112
Voice: 408-924-5360
Fax: 408-924-5396
E-mail: commstud@email.sjsu.edu
www.sjsu.edu/depts/commstudies

Agreement to Participate in Research

Responsible Investigator: Krista Nilsen, M.A. Student,
Department of Communication Studies Program, San José State
University

Title of Protocol: Dialectical tensions among college-aged
surviving siblings who have lost their brother(s) or sister(s) to a
drunk driver

1. You have been asked to participate in a research study investigating the communication patterns that exist among college-aged surviving siblings who have lost their sibling(s) to a drunk driver.
2. You will be asked to participate in 1 – 3 interviews with Krista Nilsen, a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at San José State University. Each interview will last approximately one hour in length. The interviews will be scheduled at times, dates and locations that are mutually agreed upon, which may include telephone interviews.
4. Interviews will be recorded digitally and stored in a password-protected file on my computer. The recordings will then be transcribed and labeled with your generated pseudonym. Once transcriptions are completed, digital audio files containing interviews/conversation will be deleted. Transcriptions will be kept in a cabinet, separate from any additional writing/research, and will be linked to notes only through pseudonyms.
3. In participating in this study, you are free to share and reflect on experiences that may be painful or difficult. You are welcome to reflect on moments that bring joy, as well.
4. It is my hope you will find this interview to be useful in reflecting on your own experience as a surviving sibling, and that the results of our discussion will help bring awareness to the communicative issues we all face when working through the sudden loss of a sibling, particularly when that loss is attributed to drunk driving.
5. Although the results of this study may be published, no information that could identify you will be included.

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico,
Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Fullerton,
Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy,
Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona,
Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego,
San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

Initial Here _____

6. You will not receive monetary compensation for participation in this research study.

7. Questions about this research may be addressed to Krista Nilsen, (831) 325-8178. Complaints about the research may be presented to Dr. Deanna Fassett, Department of Communication Studies, (408) 924-5511, Deanna.Fassett@sjsu.edu. Questions about a research subject's rights, or research-related injury may be presented to Pamela Stacks, Ph.D., Associate Vice President, Graduate Studies and Research, at (408) 924-2427.

8. No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose not to participate in the study.

9. Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the entire study or in any part of the study. You have the right to not answer questions you do not wish to answer. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations with San Jose State University or with other participating institutions or agencies.

10. At the time that you sign this consent form, you will receive a copy of it for your records, signed and dated by the investigator.

- **The signature of a subject on this document indicates agreement to participate in the study.**
- **The signature of a researcher on this document indicates agreement to include the above named participant in the research and attestation that the subject has been fully informed of his or her rights.**

Participant's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C – Interview Protocol

Questions for the Study, Dialectical tensions among emerging adult surviving siblings who have lost their brother(s) or sister(s) to a drunk driver

Questions for Participants

1. Can you tell me about your family and background?
2. How do you identify yourself?
3. Generally speaking, how do you feel about discussing the circumstances of the accident?
4. How did you find out?
5. Where were you in college at that point?
6. What were your living circumstances at the time? (Were you living away from home at the time? Did you have a support network around you when you found out – either geographically or physically at the time?)
7. What did you do when after the accident? (Both short term and long term. For example, did you move back home? Did you take time off of school or continue straight on through?)
8. How did your peers/colleagues find out about the accident?
9. How did your professors/supervisors find out?
10. How did this loss affect your class work?
11. What sorts of outside influences were occurring as you were in school/work?
12. How did you decide when to talk about your loss? And to whom?
13. How did your loss affect your relationship with your peers? With your professors? With your coworkers? With your supervisors?
14. What was your level of comfort in talking with your professors/supervisors to let them know what was going on with your loss outside of class?
15. Were there any internal conflicts you experienced in terms of your relationships with your peers/colleagues?
16. Were there any internal conflicts you experienced in terms of your relationships with your professors?

17. Were there any internal conflicts you experienced in terms of your relationships with your supervisors?
18. When and how do you disclose your loss to people who do not already know? Are there certain criteria you use?
19. How has this loss affected your interpersonal communication with others?
20. When you find yourself in situations that directly conflict with your loss, how do you negotiate those conflicts?
21. How do you feel physically discussing the accident?
22. How did this loss affect your relationships with your peers?
23. How do you respond when someone asks you how many siblings you have – or if you have siblings? What internal conversation/conflicts do you experience?