

“Looking Death in the Eye:” A Content Analysis of AMC’s The Walking Dead Series

**SOCI 4309- Qualitative Research Methods
Final Research Project
Dr. Rachel Romero
Department of Sociology**

INTRODUCTION

“No more kids stuff. I wish you could have the childhood that I had but that’s not going to happen. People are gonna die. I’m gonna die...Mom is gonna die...There’s no way you can ever be ready for it. I try to be but I can’t. The best we can do now is avoid it as long as we can, just keep one step ahead.”

-Rick Grimes (AMC’s *The Walking Dead* 2012).

It is never an easy task to explain the hard truth of death to a child. Add the fact that zombies are the reason why your family is dead right before your very eyes, and you have an easy recipe for a morbid outlook on life. Whether one is old or young, the death of a loved one is never easy to cope with. At one point or another everyone will experience the death of someone they know or love. When dealing with death the aftermath can be especially hard upon children who may have to experience it at such a young age when their mind and emotional well being is not yet completely equipped to understand the concept. This study aims to analyze the portrayal of how adolescent characters cope with death, loss, and grief in AMC’s *The Walking Dead*.

The portrayal of the adolescent characters, Carl, Beth, Lizzie and Micah in the series is atypical in nature given the circumstances that they each undergo an array of different experiences under a harsh environment. Each child processes the world around them differently and adapts in their own way.

Current research on child bereavement explains the strong similarity between the manner in which an adult and child grieve after the death of a loved one. The difference lies behind the complexity of children’s conceptualization of death (Dowdney 2005). Based upon the children’s developmental level the child will grieve accordingly. With the concept of death being so hard to grasp, the adolescent individual is left vulnerable to the

many effects of grief and loss. The difficulties can very well transition from childhood to adolescence.

I will explain the portrayal of how adolescent characters cope with death, loss, and grief in AMC's *The Walking Dead* by showcasing the adolescents' latent response in the conceptualization of death, their rapid maturity into adulthood, and the continued attempts to grieve by holding on to the memories of their loved ones.

This study can help add to the current knowledge behind the complex struggles associated with child bereavement. The understanding of how to better assist children in the coping of losing a parent or sibling is highly crucial to the health and emotional stability that will carry out into the adulthood of a child. Being that the youth are the future of our society, whatever issues they go through become significant to our society as a whole.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a vast amount of social and clinical research that examines the issues involving child bereavement. Various concepts covered by researchers involve children's conception of death, bereavement-driven vulnerabilities towards delinquency and rebellion, and the possible long-term traumatic experiences by children who are exposed to terrorism and harsh environments. These real world concepts are all depicted in the fictional portrayal of AMC's television series, *The Walking Dead*, by providing support to show the portrayal of the show's adolescent characters cope with death, loss and grief in the way that they do.

Despite age differences, adults and adolescents cope with bereavement in much the same way. The distinction arises between the understanding of what death is and how adolescents understand the overall concept of its effects (Dowdney 2005). Depending on the age of the child and how far developed they are they will respond appropriately to what they can truly comprehend. The concept of death is not fully understood for children under the age of seven, and therefore many question the return of their loved ones and believe that their own wishes or behavior can reverse death. Malcolm's (2011) qualitative study on children's literature analyzes and explains the representations in which death is illustrated and portrayed to children in order to conceptualize death and gain a better understanding of the after-life. Although children under the age of seven are unlikely to understand the finality of death, children are encouraged to cope with their grief through the belief of heaven, angels, and the after-life (Malcom 2011). Dowdney (2005) also shows in her research that children can show regression in developmental milestones when trying to cope with grief due to the fact that their routine life has been interrupted and therefore can cause frustration and emotional upsets. The struggles can follow through from a young age to adolescence, but by this time the child is gaining knowledge on the concept of death and dealing with it in his or her own way. By understanding that one's loved one is no longer returning an adolescent can begin to experience withdrawal and begin to hide their emotions with the pressure of new roles and responsibilities. However, understanding the concept of death does not only lead to negative outcomes, but also positive actions as well. "Grieving children can also respond in positive ways to bereavement, with an increase in independence, a determination to do

better at school, and a heightened capacity to understand the distress of others” (Dowdney 2005).

Because death is such a complex subject, adolescents are highly susceptible to the multiple effects of bereavement. It is imperative that adolescents be surrounded by positivity and motivation so that they may cope and look forward to the continuation of life despite the loss of a loved one. In Wilson’s (2002) study she explores how the media targets television programming aimed at viewers aged twelve years and younger. The study found that programming for children contained more violence than any other types of television programming. With such programming being at the front of what children view, the study also found that children were desensitized to the violence they were witnessing. If children are learning unrealistic concepts of death on television programming then that can pose possible confusion later on when death truly ensues and therefore as a result the adolescent runs the risk of not taking it seriously. With learned violence being an issue amongst the youth, subsequent research conducted by Draper (2005) also finds that parentally bereaved children are significantly more likely to fall into delinquent behavior than children who are not experiencing bereavement. Engaging in delinquent behavior is often an underlying indicator of more in-depth problems that the individual is experiencing. Oftentimes, the young individual may embark on experimenting with drugs or other street crime. Research shows that those adolescents who do not have some sort of social support in the bereavement process are more likely to drop out of school than those who are not grieving a parental death (Draper 2005). The resilience of an adolescent becomes compromised and therefore it is crucial to monitor their behavior to better aid them in their grief process.

Perhaps the most important concept studied in the topic of death, loss, and grief amongst all the research compiled is that of the post-traumatic experiences encountered by child victims of terrorism. The topic of terrorism is heavily displayed and experienced by the adolescent characters throughout the span of *The Walking Dead* series and therefore is a significant topic to cover. The research of Shaw (2003) and Edgar-Bailey (2010) both explain and describe how the aftermath of being in a traumatic situation as a child can lead to life-long repercussions. When a child is in a traumatic situation of terror while experiencing the loss of a loved one, the situation then takes precedence over the experience of the loss and therefore the grief process is inhibited which in turn can lead to a problematic situation later on in life (Shaw 2003). The importance of grieving is important for a child to cope with their feelings and learn how to proceed. Edgar-Bailey presents powerful evidence that shows the prevalence of psychological morbidities amongst children who have experienced terrorism through war-related events. The psychological responses to the traumatic events range from mood disorders, post-traumatic stress, somatic symptoms, and disruptive behavior.

Overall, the research behind child bereavement and the ways in which to cope with the concept of death all play a significant role in the understanding of behavior patterns proceeding death of loved ones. The following research will further the understanding of why the adolescent characters in the show behave in such a way that is probably not common but they do so because they are under special circumstances of trauma and terror that in turn play key roles in the execution of their actions. All this research aides in not only better understanding the behaviors behind the process of bereavement for the adolescent characters in the television show, *The Walking Dead*, but

it also provides significant information for society's understanding of how to better assist children in the coping of losing a parent or sibling.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes unobtrusive method to analyze the portrayal of how adolescent characters cope with death, loss, and grief in AMC's *The Walking Dead*. I conducted a content analysis of a purposive sampling of six episodes of the series, *The Walking Dead*. The six episodes spanned from season one to season five. The sample size was analyzed through the Internet streaming media source, Netflix. Corresponding data used to analyze the content was obtained from various research databases provided by Texas State University. This method was chosen because of the abundant amount of non-interactive data that can be observed by viewing the media source's content. For the purpose of this study, only the adolescent characters Carl, Beth, Lizzie and Micah were examined since each plays a key role in the moral of the show's storyline.

The Walking Dead series displays the journey of survival amongst a group of people who face a series of post-apocalyptic events that is caused by a zombie virus. Every single character faces hardships and life-changing events on a daily basis. Death is a constant factor in the series so therefore loss and grief is a subsequent side effect. The adolescent characters take the brunt of the loss of members in the group because they are not emotionally mature to handle the loss.

Upon initial research of the question I drew upon the knowledge of having already watched the series and being up to date with the most current episode. Based on chronological order of the death of certain characters I searched the Netflix database for

episodes in which each character directly dealt with death of a close immediate family member. I re-watched the episodes and collected data that was relevant to the topic. I grouped my data based on each adolescent character and specifically looked for references of emotional trauma, actual moments in which the characters engaged or were exposed to the killing of zombies or humans, and elements of grief experiences. Once I gathered all my data I used a chart to look for elements in which each character held in common. Those elements served as themes for supporting evidence in answering my question of how each character was portrayed coping with the issues of death, loss, and grief.

Though the research question was sufficiently answered by the content analysis of the chosen media source, there were a few limitations in the research study. The first limitation encountered was the lack of scholarly literature analyzing *The Walking Dead* series. Little to no analysis of the show has been transcribed so there was no support in that perspective. Second, since the series is ongoing there is an abundant amount of data to sift through spanning more than sixty episodes, therefore valuable data could have been left out that could show supporting evidence to the question being asked.

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore the portrayal of how adolescent characters cope with death, loss, and grief in AMC's *The Walking Dead*. The data analyzed was obtained from six different episodes of *The Walking Dead* series. The episodes examined were "30 Days Without an Accident," "Nebraska," "Welcome to the Tombs," "The Grove," "Alone" and "Clear." The data observed within the episodes

helped in answering the question of how the adolescents coped with death, loss, and grief by showcasing their portrayal dealing with these issues in the show.

Examination of the data promoted an emergence of three prevalent themes. The first being the latent conceptualization of death amongst the adolescents, the second being the rapid maturity undergone by the adolescent characters, and third the frequent displayed application of coping mechanisms utilized by the adolescents when grieving their loved ones. The following analysis will showcase each theme in hopes of providing the depiction of grieving adolescents in their portrayal within *The Walking Dead* series.

Theme 1: The adolescents in AMC's *The Walking Dead* are not fully developed to completely understand the concept of death.

The initial theme prevalent with the adolescent characters in the series highlights the children's lack of conceptualization towards death. The children are not developmentally equipped to understand that the population of their world is being consumed and killed by zombies who were once human, but then turned into the dead. A great portrayal of this can be observed in season four, episode one, titled "30 Days Without An Accident," when the youngest members of the group, Lizzie and Micah, begin to name the zombies that are grouped near a fence outside of their camp. Lizzie voices that the zombies are "not dead, just different." She often plays with them and views them as pets. She does not think that they will hurt her because she feels that deep down inside they understand what she tells them. This finding can be viewed as evidence regarding the sociological developmental life stage of adolescents and the transition they must first undergo in order to comprehend matters of death.

Following that observation is also one of attempted suicide. The issue of suicide ties into the theme of latent conceptualization of death amongst the adolescents in the series when in season two, episode eight, titled “Nebraska,” the adolescent character Beth attempts suicide thinking that she will “live on” with her family members who have turned into zombies. Beth’s emotional heartache and despair of losing her mother, sister, and childhood friend bring her to contemplate death with the hopes of “reuniting” with her loved ones in the form of a zombie. Beth’s lack of understanding that once you turn into a zombie you have no possibility of cognitive interaction of “reuniting” with a loved one, shows the complexity behind the concept of death and the youth’s lack of understanding.

The patterned theme shows the portrayal of the adolescent characters coping with death and loss despite their lack of complete comprehension toward death’s finite nature. This holds sociological relevancy because although adolescents in our society do not cope with death and loss caused by zombies, they do face issues of death and loss that may cause confusion just like the experiences of the adolescent characters in *The Walking Dead*.

Theme 2: Adolescents in *The Walking Dead* series undergo experiences of rapid maturity.

Although the adolescent characters in *The Walking Dead* do not fully understand the concept of death at the conception of the zombie apocalypse, their day-to-day experiences of despair, fear, and encounters of death lead them to quickly mature and become enveloped in the blood shed of their new world. In season three, episode sixteen, titled “Welcome to the Tombs,” the adolescent character, Carl, is given by his father (the

leader of the group) the responsibility to stay behind and take care of his newborn sister after the death of his mother in childbirth. Carl not only has to look after his sibling, but is also left in charge of guarding the prison cellblocks inside the prison his group is using as refuge from the zombies. It is at this pivotal moment that one can observe the mature nature in which Carl handles himself by taking action as to what needs to be done when outsiders break into the prison and threaten the safety of him and his group. This observational data is clearly interpretive of current research findings showing that not all children deviate into delinquency while grieving, but in fact the traumatic experience of losing a loved one can prompt the child to “respond in positive ways to bereavement, with an increase in independence, and a heightened capacity to understand the distress of others” (Dowdney 2005). Such was the case with Carl when he stepped into his father’s shoes and made decisions that he had never made before.

Perhaps the most significant observation of the present theme is the experience of maturity undergone by the adolescent character, Micah. Her once trustful, fearful, and hesitant self; behavior depictive of child-like mentality, quickly vanished when she was forced to grow up and make a life-altering decision in season four, episode fourteen titled “The Grove.” The portrayal of Micah’s character is one of being terrified, yet unwilling to kill a zombie. Her innocence of being a child views the killing of zombies as inhumane and mean. She states that she “would rather die, than kill.” The moment that Micah and her sister Lizzie are faced with the threat of being bitten by a zombie, is the moment when Micah is faced with making the mature decision of keeping her sister safe or killing her first zombie. Micah goes on to kill the zombie and comes to the realization that death is necessary to live.

The sociological relevancy behind this theme is one of acknowledging the positive behavior that can come from adolescents and children when faced with the scenario of loss and death. The adolescent individual in reality can be empowered by the situation and learn from it. The findings show that adolescents are capable of survival and hold the possibility of receiving more credit than rarely given.

Theme 3: Adolescents in *The Walking Dead* often display coping mechanisms of grief when dealing with the loss of a loved one.

The final theme most often displayed throughout the data was the different ways in which each adolescent character grieved their loved one. The adolescent characters were bombarded with death on a daily-basis. This left no time to grieve and therefore while having to survive and live in fear, the young characters reminisced and held on to whatever memories they had of their deceased loved ones.

In season three, episode twelve, titled "Clear," the adolescent character Carl is granted the opportunity to go on a run with this father into the old neighborhood they once lived in before the zombie apocalypse. While his father is concerned with finding weapons and food, Carl's only mission is to obtain a picture of his old life with his family so that he can one day show his baby sister. Carl's way of coping with the loss of his mother is by memorializing her and holding on to the hope of sharing his memories with his sibling who will never have the chance to know their mother.

The adolescent characters Lizzie, Micah, and Beth each tend to cope with the grief of losing their parents by reminiscing on the lessons and advice their parents told them before passing away. In season four, episode thirteen, titled "Alone," the adolescent character, Lizzie is in distress and experiences anxiety, her little sister Micah tells her

“remember what momma said...just look at the pretty flowers and breathe.” Holding on to what they remember, the girls find comfort in their mother’s memory despite not physically having her there to protect them.

The last recurring pattern observed in the data shows significance in sociological fieldwork regarding the bereavement of adolescents. The data shows the portrayal of how adolescents cope with grief of their loved ones. This finding is not just true of children in *The Walking Dead* series but of all people dealing with the death of loved ones. It is a sociological process of bereavement.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the portrayal of how adolescent characters cope with death, loss, and grief in AMC’s *The Walking Dead*. The analysis of six different episodes revealed three different themes. These themes were supported by using direct observations of the character portrayals in the series, as well as literature support from researching regarding death, loss, and grief.

The major findings showed that adolescents cope with death loss and grief in various ways. Adolescents are constantly faced with trying to understand death for what it is, having to deal with being catapulted into a new world of living without their loved ones, having to mature quickly to fend for themselves, and lastly dealing with bereavement and trying to move on while holding on to the memories of their loved ones.

The limitations of the study included lack of research on the media source chosen to be analyzed. Future research could avoid this obstacle by perhaps choosing another media source pertinent to the topic being analyzed. There were several research studies

based on movies regarding zombie apocalypse scenarios but none regarding a television series.

Overall, the research behind child bereavement and the ways in which to cope with the concept of death all play a significant role in the understanding of behavior patterns preceding death of loved ones. This research aides in not only bettering the understanding of behaviors behind the process of bereavement for the adolescent characters in the television show, *The Walking Dead*, but it also provides significant information for society's understanding of how to better assist children in the coping of losing a love one.

Bibliography

Literature:

Draper, Ana and Maggie Hancock. 2011. "Childhood Parental Bereavement: The Risk of Vulnerability to Delinquency and Factors that Compromise Resilience." *Mortality* 16(4): 285-306. Retrieved from SOCI Index on June 20, 2015.

Dowdney, Linda. 2005. "Children Bereaved by Parent or Sibling Death." *Psychiatry* 4(9): 118-122. Retrieved from Science Direct on June 20, 2015.

Edgar-Bailey, Meredith and Victoria Kress. 2010. "Resolving Child and Adolescent Traumatic Grief: Creative Techniques and Interventions." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 5(2): 158-176. Retrieved from SOCI Index on June 20, 2015.

Malcolm, Nancy L. 2011. "Images of Heaven and the Spiritual Afterlife: Qualitative Analysis of Children's Storybooks about Death, Dying, Grief, and Bereavement." *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 62(1): 51-76. Retrieved from SOCI Index on June 13, 2015.

Shaw, Jon A. 2003. "Children Exposed to War/Terrorism." *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 6(4): 237-246. Retrieved from Medline Complete on June 19, 2015.

Wilson, Barbara and Stacy L. Smith. 2002. "Violence in Children's Television Programming: Assessing the Risks." *Journal of Communication* 52(1): 5-31. Retrieved from Business Source Complete on June 13, 2015.

Visual Media:

Darabont, Frank. 2010. *The Walking Dead*. AMC Studios.

