

Echoes of Loss: Parental Death and Extended Kin Relations in Younger Adulthood

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Introduction and Background

Parental death is a critical and life-altering event that often requires reorganization of own identity (Umberson, 2003) and established relations within the family system (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013). “Off-time” parental loss may deprive children not only of a parental figure but also entail losses or compensations in the wider family network. Prior research has examined the ties between bereaved children and their “nuclear kin” – for example, the relationship between children and surviving parents, highlighting the importance of emotional closeness with a surviving mother for fewer depressive symptoms in adult children (Stokes, 2016), or the ties between children and siblings, demonstrating the importance of solidarity but the presence of conflict (Hank, 2021; Kalmijn & Leopold, 2019). However, young adults also have meaningful links to extended family members (Carr, 2018; Elder, 1994, 1998) – such as maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins (e.g., Hünteler et al., 2025; Leopold et al., 2025). Moreover, considering the idea of linked lives (Carr, 2018; Elder, 1994, 1998) and following family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004), the experience of loss can be considered a family event that is commonly shared among its members. When an adult child loses a parent, it also signifies the loss of a partner, daughter, son, sister, or brother in the family network (Stokes, 2016; Stroebe et al., 2013). It means that in one way or another, every family member is affected by the loss. For a bereaved child, however, the loss may be especially consequential for family ties, as parents serve an adhesive function, binding the child’s access to the broader kin network, as outlined by social network theory (Burt, 2005). If a parent dies, the child may lose the adhesive role the parent played in the family, which ensured access to relationships with extended kin. Thus, any change at one level of the family subsystem, such as parental death, may involve changes at all levels of the family system, including relationships within the extended family network (Cox & Paley, 1997; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Yet, kinship datasets allowing to study how the extended ties for bereaved compared to non-bereaved

young adults differ are limited. The **main contribution** of this study is therefore to employ new kinship data collected by KINMATRIX (Leopold et al., 2024) that addresses this unfortunate gap.

In the present study, we focus on the ego-centric family networks of young adults (25-35 years) who did or did not experience their first parental death, and examine how they differed in their relationships to nuclear kin and, in particular, to extended kin, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Ties to extended kin relations can remain unchanged, weaken, or strengthen, depending on the kin lineage (affected vs non-affected), parent's gender, young adult's age at death, or re-partnering of the surviving parent. Drawing on the general ideas outlined above from the life-course framework, family systems theory, and social network theory, we derive our expectations in the following section.

Hypotheses

First, extended kin relations on paternal and maternal sides are conditioned on lineages that may be disrupted by parental death of the respective parent. Children's relationships with extended family members are likely to depend on the quality of their nuclear family relationships – that is, the ties between children and parents (Burt, 2005). When one parent dies, this tragedy entails the loss of that relationship and, as a consequence, may weaken the child's ties to the extended kin on the deceased parent's side, suggesting potential *erosion*. In contrast, ties with the surviving parent and that parent's extended kin may intensify following the loss. Witnessing the grief of the surviving parent may involve sympathy, a shared experience of loss, and a need for resilience (Walsh, 2016; Marshall, 2004). Similarly, shared bereavement experiences may also bring the surviving parent's wider family network together as a safe and resilient net of support to collectively deal with the void left by the deceased (*compensation*; Walsh, 2016; Walsh & Mcgoldrick, 2013). Thus, parental death may involve compensations or no major changes in the relationship with the remaining parent and in ties with the extended kin in the non-affected line, relative to the set point of families where both parents are alive and together.

Affected lineage H1: Extended family relations are weaker in the line of the deceased parent (affected kin line) compared with families where both parents are alive and together. Extended kin relations in the surviving parent's line (non-affected kin line) are intensified or do not differ relative to those families where both parents are alive and together.

Second, the weakening of extended kin relations in the affected kin line may be particularly pronounced in cases of paternal death. In Western kinship systems, in which relations in the paternal line are, on average, weaker (Leopold et al., 2025), this expectation may hold particular importance. In contrast, mothers often serve as kin keepers in the family and have closer attachments with their children (Bowlby, 1990), partially due to traditional expectations for caring (Bianchi et al., 2006). Although extended kin relations are generally expected to weaken in the affected line, the death of a mother may bring some family members together to compensate for her loss as the primary kin keeper and hence weaken potential erosions – in contrast to the erosions expected after father’s death. Therefore, potential erosions in the maternal extended kin line may be less pronounced than in the paternal extended kin line.

Parent’s gender H2: Extended family relations are weaker in the line of the deceased parent (affected kin line) in cases of paternal death than in cases of maternal death.

Third, parental death may be particularly relevant for young adults, as they may carry potential changes in the family network into their adult lives following an untimely, or “off-time” loss (Elder, 1994; Smith-Greenaway et al., 2025). Parental deaths occurring even earlier in life, such as those before adulthood, may limit children’s opportunities to establish independent relationships with extended kin, compared to deaths occurring after adulthood.

Timing H3: Extended family relations are weaker on the side of the deceased parent (affected kin line) in cases when parental death occurred before adulthood rather than after adulthood.

Finally, the surviving parent’s re-partnering may further weaken extended kin relationships on the deceased parent’s side, due to the formation of new family ties or the introduction of potential step-kin (Hadfield et al., 2018).

Re-partnering H4: Extended family relations are weaker on the side of the deceased parent (affected kin line) in cases when the surviving parent re-partnered following death compared to cases when re-partnering did not occur.

Data and methods

We used **novel data** from a large-scale cross-sectional survey, which collected extensive information about ego-centric kinship networks of young adults aged 25 to 35 in the United States and nine European countries: UK, Germany, Poland, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and the Netherlands. The KINMATRIX survey (Leopold et al., 2024, 2025), conducted in 2022

and 2023, covers family networks in unprecedented scope and detail, allowing us to investigate differences by parental death status for ties to a large array of nuclear (biological parents and siblings) and extended (grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) kin from both paternal and maternal lines. We used data from the pooled sample of KINMATRIX to study the effects of parental death on four relational outcomes: contact frequency to kin (from 1 – “Not at all close” to 5 – “Very close”), emotional closeness to kin (from 1 – “Never” to 5 – “Once a week or more”), importance of kin (from 0 – “Not important” to 1 – “Important”) and reliance on kin (from 0 – “Cannot count on” to 1 – “Can count on”). Although our rationale to pool the data from all countries was due to sample size issues, we accounted for country-specific effects in our models. Our analysis was based on OLS and logistic regression models with clustered standard errors drawing on data provided by $N=8,412$ anchor respondents ($N=1,058$ anchors who experienced parental death) and comprising more than $N=160,000$ anchor-kin dyads. We compared individuals who experienced the death of one parent to those whose parents were both alive and together (to have a clear comparison group). We controlled for potential confounders, such as anchor’s age, subjective social status, number of kin, flag variables (e.g. to control for potential differences in terms of knowledge about the names, numbers, and/or living status of extended kin), and country specific binary indicators.

Preliminary results

Our descriptive **results** indicated that young adults who experienced the death of a parent were, on average, 21 years old. Father’s deaths were more common ($N=768$) than mother’s deaths ($N=290$). Anchors from families that did and did not experience parental death were, on average, of the same age at the time of the interview (approximately $M = 30$), and reported similar levels of health ($M = 2.22$ vs. 2.06 , respectively), life satisfaction ($M = 6.58$ vs. 6.92 , respectively), and number of kin in the family ($M = 21.18$ vs. 19.27 , respectively). Respondents who had not lost a parent reported, on average, higher self-perceived social status than those who had experienced parental loss. Our preliminary **results** from the OLS and logistic regression models supported the expectation that the extended family relations tended to be weaker in the line of the deceased parent (affected kin line) compared with families where both parents are alive and together (*Affected lineage H1*). In the non-affected line, relationships with extended kin did not differ significantly from those in families where both parents were alive and together. We did not find that extended kin relations were weaker in the affected line in cases of paternal compared to maternal death (*Parent’s gender H2*). When comparing very early (before age 18) and early (ages 18–35)

experiences of parental death, we found the differences within the nuclear family. For example, results indicated less frequent contact with the father following a mother's death before age 18, but not vice versa. With regard to extended kin, slightly weaker relationships were observed with paternal, but not maternal, grandparents in cases of very early paternal death, along with lower contact frequency with paternal, but not maternal, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins following very early paternal loss (*partially supporting Timing H3*). Notably, when the mother re-partnered following the father's death, contact with paternal aunts, uncles, and cousins were, on average, weaker (*partially supporting Re-partnering H4*).

Overall, our study suggests that the weakened relations for young adults who lost their first parent may go beyond nuclear kin relations and extrapolate into the wider extended family network.

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