

Welcome

to RSEC18 Conference

**Complexity in Research:
Researcher–Participant Dynamic Interactions**

3 July 2025

9:00 - 16:30

University House,
LS2 9JR



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Morning Session Presenters

- **Reflections on insider/outsider positions in participatory educational research.**

Carolyn Bradley, PGR, School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds

- **Navigating Insider-Outsider Positionality: Reflections on Researching Mature Students' Access to Higher Education.**

Janith Jayatilake Kankanamalage, PGR, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds

- **A Messy Interrelated Ecology: Situating Researcher in the Rhizome of Research.**

Samuel Lee, PGR, School of Education, University of Leeds

- **Developing best practice guidelines for research with the bereaved: Practitioner perspectives.**

Elizabeth Fair, PGR, School of Music, University of Leeds

- **Lived Experience and Its Influence on the Researcher-Participant Connection.**

Clare Copley, PGR, School of Education, University of Leeds

Elizabeth Fair

PGR, School of Music,
University of Leeds

**Developing best practice
guidelines for research
with the bereaved:
Practitioner perspectives**

Best Practice Bereavement Research: Updating Guidelines

Elizabeth Fair
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Presentation Overview

01. Study Overview

02. Study Results

03. Research Implications

Study Background

Death and bereavement as sensitive research: emotional, disclosure of highly personal information (Evans et al., 2017)

Implications of research on death and bereavement for researchers and research participants:

- Participants: positive experiences of research (Buckle et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2017);
- Researchers: emotionally demanding; vicarious trauma (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2017);

More research is needed to develop better research practices in this area (Mallon & Elliot, 2019).

There is little to no research on the perspectives of gatekeepers such as bereavement care practitioners on bereavement research.

Study 1 Aims

01.

To understand the needs and concerns of the bereaved from the perspective of those working with the bereaved and understand the roles of charities and organisations in supporting the bereaved

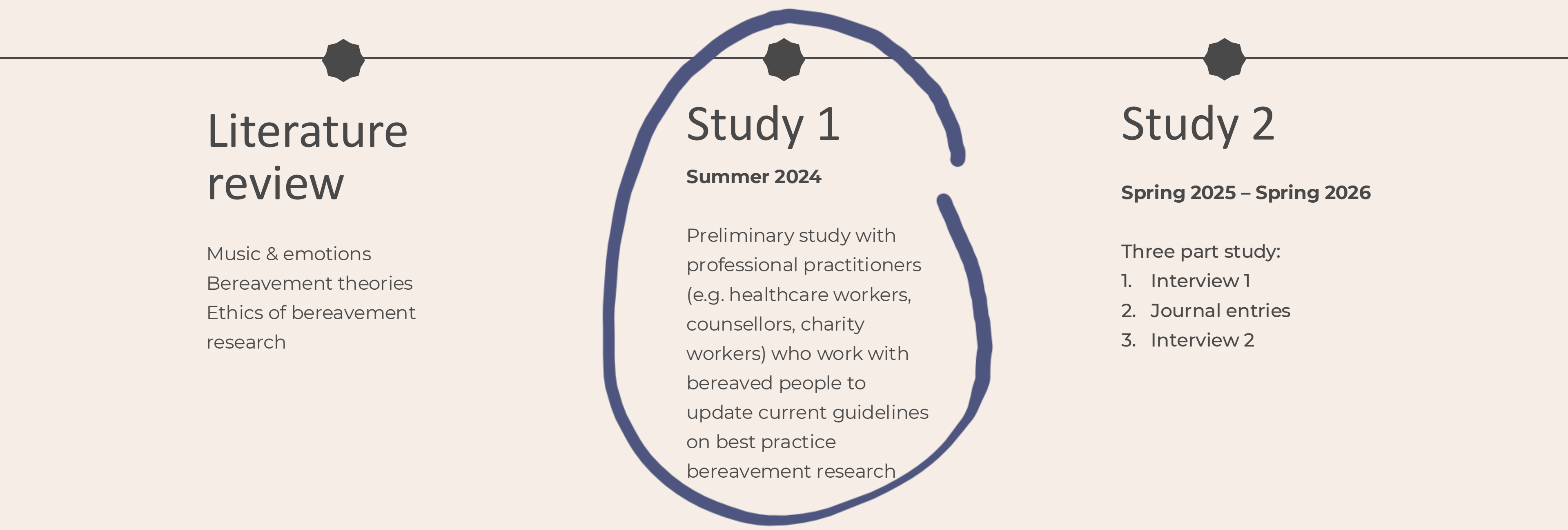
02.

To gain a better perspective of the ethical issues involved in research with the bereaved and how this research can be carried out in a compassionate and ethical manner which minimises the risk of harm to both interviewee and interviewer

03.

To gain insights into good practices for safeguarding the wellbeing of the researcher

PhD Overview



Literature review

Music & emotions
Bereavement theories
Ethics of bereavement research

Study 1

Summer 2024

Preliminary study with professional practitioners (e.g. healthcare workers, counsellors, charity workers) who work with bereaved people to update current guidelines on best practice bereavement research

Study 2

Spring 2025 – Spring 2026

Three part study:

1. Interview 1
2. Journal entries
3. Interview 2

Method

30-55 minute semi-structured online interviews

Participants:

- 14 bereavement care practitioners from 10 organisations
- Age range 27-60 years (average 46.6 years)
- Roles included counsellors, wellbeing coordinators, nurses, creative practitioners, and funeral directors
- Length working in bereavement care 1.5-12 years (average 6.2 years)

Interview questions related to:

- the role the charity and individual played in supporting bereaved people
- the main challenges for bereaved individuals
- the interviewee's perspective on how research with bereaved persons could best be carried out in a compassionate and ethical manner

Thematic analysis



Table 1.

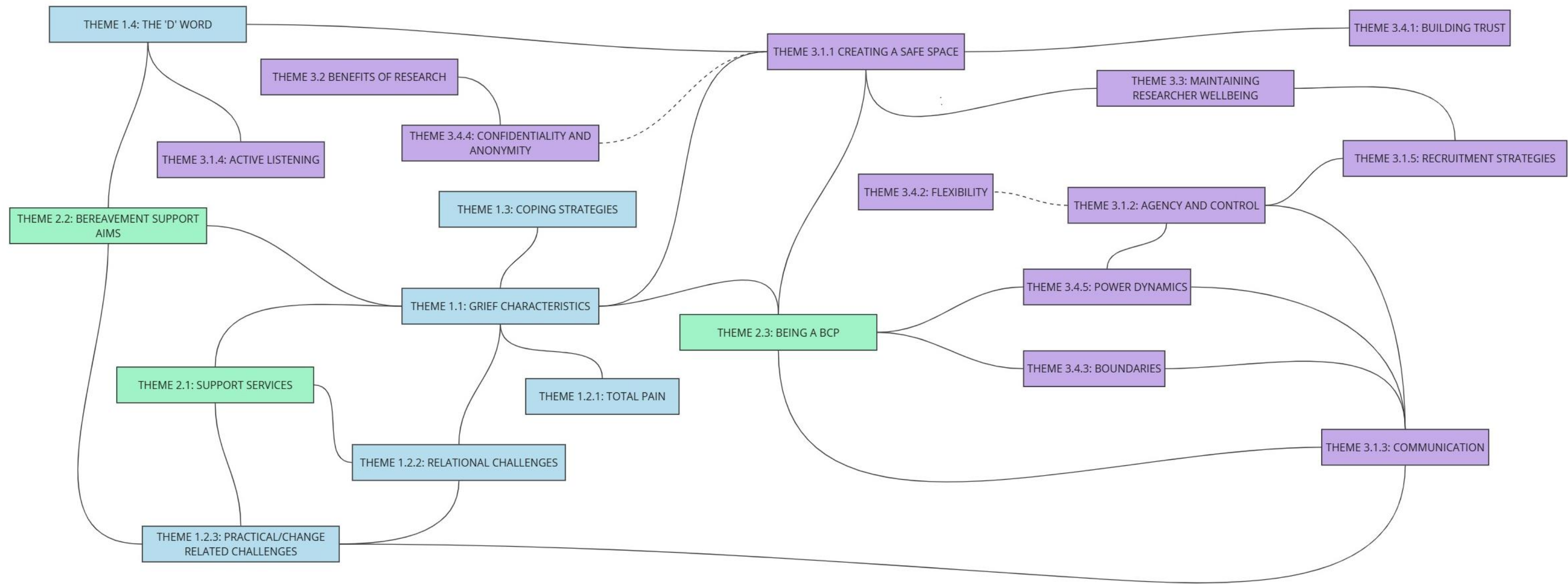
Themes, subthemes.

Theme	Subthemes	No. Codes	Participants
About grief	Characteristics of grief	7	All except 4
	Grief-related challenges		
	Total pain	12	All except 8
	Relational	7	All except 8
	Practical/Other	24	All
	Coping strategies	5	All
	The 'D' word	9	All
Bereavement care	Support services	18	All
	Bereavement support aims	34	All
	Being a BCP	28	All
Doing research	Actions for participant wellbeing	25	All
	Benefits of research	7	All except 2, 3, 4, 13
	Maintaining researcher wellbeing	11	All
	Researcher-participant relationship	17	All

Table 1.

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Building Trust

Key ideas

- Put bereaved people first, let them lead, hold a safe space
- View them as individuals with lived experience rather than research participants
- Balancing personal and professional identities important

I suppose it's just finding a way, you know, finding a way to kind of be personable and human really, but also be professional. That's not always an easy line, is it? - BCP6

Be human when you approach them, you know, be friendly. - BCP14

It's about building a relationship with them. - BCP1

Flexibility

Key ideas

- Flexibility around the practicalities of interviews
 - E.g. location, lighting, online vs. in-person
 - E.g. rescheduling where necessary
- Important due to unpredictability of research
- Contributes to feelings of psychological safety

You never know what is going to come out of people's stories. - BCP1

You could find yourself rearranging all sorts of things, but I think that the acknowledgement that you give to understanding that on a day when something is planned may not be a good day and therefore needing to rearrange, and being flexible in that will help to paint the picture that you're on their side if you like, and understand what they're struggling with. - BCP3

I suppose as much as you can, offering that flexibility that okay, we've got this time and date, but if it doesn't feel right for you, we can put in another day ... cause I wonder if you could lose people that just think "oh, that was my opportunity, and I haven't taken it, so I'm not gonna do that anymore." So I suppose it's kind of offering as much flexibility as you can. - BCP9

Boundaries

Key ideas

- Questions around personal experiences common
- Personal disclosure can be useful in building rapport, but this should be done cautiously and with boundaries
- Recognising the boundaries of your professional role important

If you want [participants] to share personal information, emotions, then maybe [they] want to find out who you are, what you're about, a little bit more information before [they] feel happy to share. - BCP1

I do get asked a lot if I've been bereaved myself and things like that ... and sometimes people will ask you about your personal life ... if you want to answer it, you know, to give minimal detail...it's a difficult balance, but still try and be, to be sort of personable and to be human as well...it's to try and build that rapport and be yourself to a certain level without giving away too much and being overfamiliar, but you know you want to make people feel comfortable. - BCP5

Ultimately I can't be watching everybody 24 hours a day, and there's an element of people who ... people are all adults and they will make the decisions they make. - BCP3

We all have a version of things maybe that as professionals that we might feel okay to tell. - BCP9

Confidentiality & Anonymity

Key ideas

- Important for building a trusting relationship
- Note of caution: some stories will still be traceable, even when anonymised

I know for your research ... things are anonymized, and but they'll still be able to see who they are in that in that story that's being published ... as a professional, if you've worked with a family, you'll know that story ... and the public may as well [if it's a high profile death] We've had a high profile death in [area], you know, and anybody says just a tiny bit of it and you're like, "Oh, yeah, that's that death". We'd know, you know, and it, there's anonymizing by just changing the name but maybe that's not enough detail to kind of change. - BCP14

Sometimes when I'm talking about my own experiences of grief, I say something, which I then think, that's not true, or you know it's my thoughts are so jumbled around something, and there are so many things that are true at the same time that sometimes I make a statement and then reflect and think, "Why did I say that, that's just like not a real representation of my experience!" And so ... I guess things being anonymized, and, like all of those things, can help with that. - BCP10

Power dynamics

Key ideas

- Participants may view the researcher as in a position of authority
- Bereaved participants as potentially vulnerable
- Important to give participants some power
- E.g. flexibility, reminding them of their responsibilities
- Trusting them to manage their wellbeing

I think if you're confident you've outlined all the risks to them and they're aware of what they were going into then yeah I very much believe in people's own personal responsibility to themselves ... as long as they haven't disclosed anything that I would be concerned about for their safety, I have to trust in them to look after themselves, and you do have to give people...I think it's important that we give people their own personal autonomy and responsibility and sort of encourage that. - BCP5

People when they open up about their grief, they're opening up about something so vulnerable that it's exposing. It's almost like this is a closed door, but I'm gonna open it for you and let you in. - BCP7

Letting them lead is the big one for me, and I guess it depends on what your questions are going to be like in terms of how much you're going to be able to do that. - BCP4

Recommendations (i)

Research design

- Consider co-creation of research
- Approach data collection points with as few questions as possible
- Allow additional time for data collection
- Take care over the structure of interview questions

Recruitment:

- Be flexible and sensitive in your approach to the timing and location of interviews with bereaved participants
- Consider scheduling a preliminary phone call between the interviewer and interviewee to allow participants to ask questions in a low stakes situation
- Emphasise the two-way process of research



Recommendations (ii)

Communicating with participants:

- Reassure participants of anonymity and confidentiality
- Avoid making assumptions about a participant's relationship with the deceased or what they might feel like after a loss
- Reassure participants that they do not need to look after the researcher
- Clearly communicate roles and expectations of participants, interviewers, and the research process
- Explain what support is in place including signposting and safeguarding procedures
- Boundaries are important in holding a professional yet empathic distance between researcher and research participants



Recommendations (iii)

During research:

- Active listening
- Sensitivity around terminology
- Develop skills in holding space for distressed individuals
- Research participants to take responsibility for keeping themselves safe
- Maintaining participant autonomy important
- Engage relationally
- Remind participants of opportunities to withdraw/pause participation

After the research

- Offer processes like member-checking
- Follow-up including email, signposting, member-checking
- Keep them informed of how research progresses



Recommendations (iv)

Researcher wellbeing:

- Professional discretion around personal disclosures
- Signposting when you reach the boundaries of your work
- Take a proactive approach to researcher wellbeing
- Tools for wellbeing: clinical supervision, reflexive journals, working within a team, reflective practice sessions, taking time off

Research and awareness:

- Raising awareness of how best to help bereaved people
- Accessibility of research findings important
- More research needed on: BCP wellbeing, cultural differences in grief, testing bereavement models, impact of location on interview experience
- Educating BCPs on research processes
- Researchers to find ways to give back to bereaved communities

Next Steps

Personal Music Use in Emotional Wellbeing after a Bereavement

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR MUSIC AND GRIEF STUDY

Opportunity to reflect on your experiences, improve bereavement support services, and help grieving individuals by sharing your experiences.

Participation involves:

1. One-hour interview based on a musical item or piece of music of your choice
2. Three reflective journals completed over a three month period
3. Second interview to expand on themes from previous stages



Inclusion criteria:

1. Must have experienced a bereavement of someone close 6 months to 2 years ago
2. Must be comfortable talking about your grief



Your involvement will help improve bereavement services and provide you with a chance to reflect on and learn from your own experiences

For more information:

Contact Elizabeth Fair (lead researcher)
via email: mc22eif@leeds.ac.uk

Ethical Approval No.:
AHC FREC – 2025 2373–3454



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Any questions?

mc22eif@leeds.ac.uk

Select References

ON RESEARCHING BEREAVEMENT

Buckle, J. L., Dwyer, S. C., & Jackson, M. (2010). Qualitative bereavement research: Incongruity between the perspectives of participants and research ethics boards. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13(2), Article 2.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2009). Researching sensitive topics: Qualitative research as emotion work. *Qualitative Research*, 9(1), Article 1.

Evans, R., Ribbens McCarthy, J., Bowlby, S., Wouango, J., & Kébé, F. (2017). Producing emotionally sensed knowledge? Reflexivity and emotions in researching responses to death. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(6), Article 6.

Mallon & Elliott. (2019). The emotional risks of turning stories into data: An exploration of the experiences of qualitative researchers working on sensitive topics. *Societies*, 9(3), Article 3.

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WELLBEING PROTOCOL

Before participation:

- You will be given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form before each interview
- You will be given the chance to have an informal phone call to get to know the researcher and ask any questions
- You will be provided with a copy of the interview questions

During participation:

- Prioritise your wellbeing
- You can pause or stop the interview or research participation at any time
- You can opt not to answer a question if you would rather not

After participation:

- Follow-up thank you email including support services
- You will be offered the chance to comment on the research findings, including making changes to your data where you would like to

For more information:

Contact Elizabeth Fair
(lead researcher):
mc22eif@leeds.ac.uk.

RESEARCH PROCESS

INTRODUCTORY PHONE CALL

A chance to meet the researcher and ask any questions you might have
After the phone call, you will be asked whether you would like to participate in the research; if yes, you will be given a consent form to sign before taking part in each interview

STAGE ONE: INTERVIEW ONE

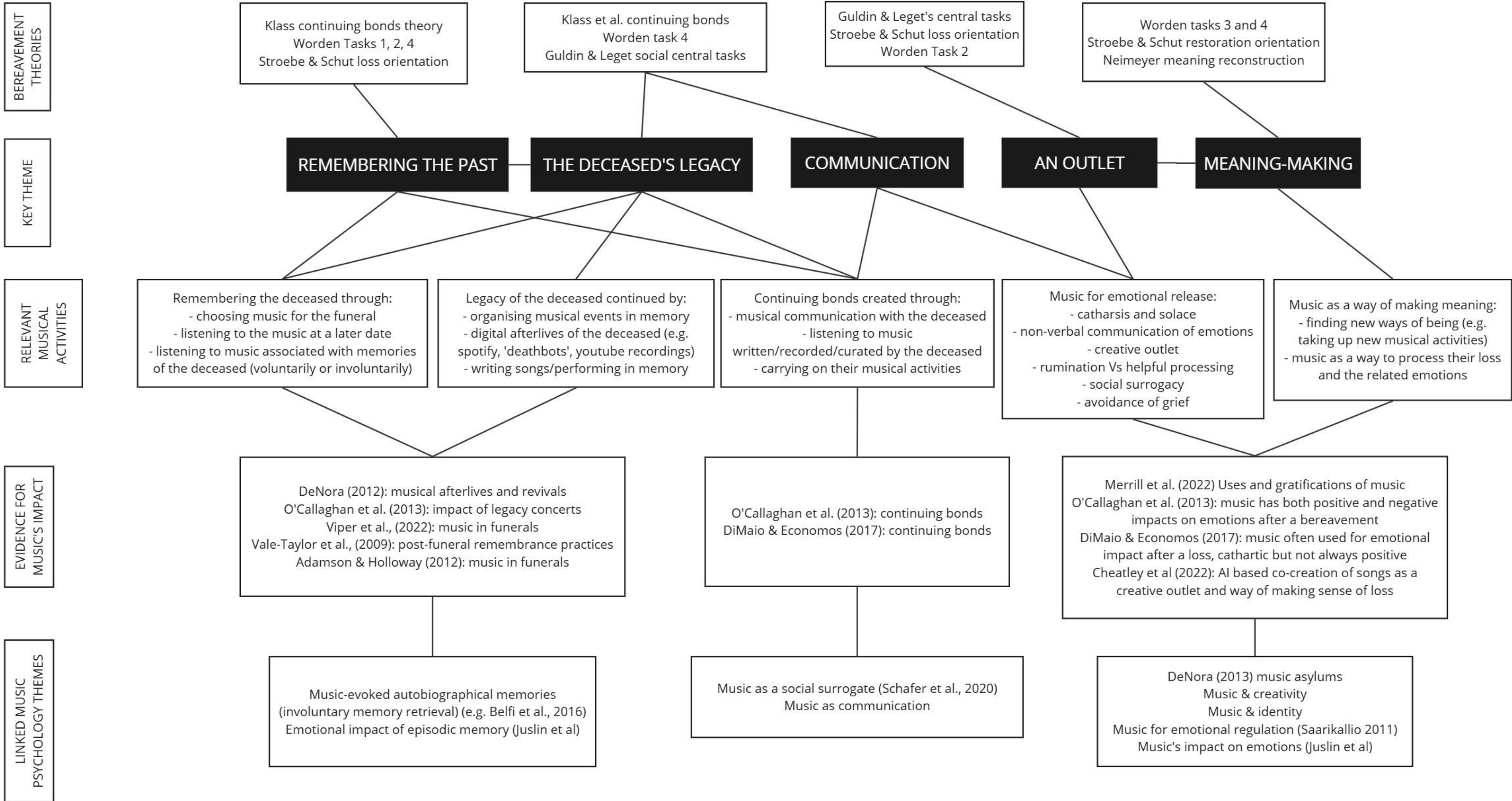
Based on a musical object (photo, playlist, instrument, sheet music etc) which has been significant for you since your loved one died (or you think may become important in the future)
You can also choose not to bring a musical object if you would prefer
Approximately one hour long, in person or online

STAGE TWO: JOURNALS

Three journals completed over a three month period between the two interviews
Written reflections on experiences relating to memories, connections with your loved one, and finding meaning and purpose
Either handwritten or typed out

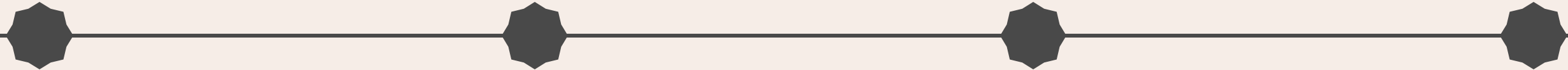
STAGE THREE: INTERVIEW TWO

Approximately three months after Stage One
Approximately one hour long
A chance to explore themes raised in the first interview and subsequent journals further





Study 2 Overview



Introductory phone call

Meet the researcher
Ask questions

Interview 1

Based on a musical object
of their choosing
One hour long, either in
person or online

Journals

Three journal entries
completed over a three
month period
Reflections relating to
memories, connections
with their loved one, and
finding meaning and
purpose
Either handwritten or typed
out

Interview 2

Approx. three months after
Interview 1
Exploring themes raised in
interview 1 and journals

CURRENT STAGE:
RECRUITING
PARTICIPANTS



We hope you found the sessions
insightful and the discussions enriching.
To help us improve future events, we'd
really appreciate your feedback.

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webpage: www.18rsec.ed.uk



Thank You
for Your
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*The Organising Committee,
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