

## Object Repertoires That Evoke Memories For Mothers And Fathers Who Have Lost Children. Tenerife. Spain

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### Summary

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This qualitative study, with a phenomenological focus, explores the use of objects that evoke memories held by mothers and fathers mourning the death of their children. The objects that facilitate a closeness to the children who are no longer there. In this analysis of these objects, we pay particular attention to understanding their description and to the meaning that they have for mothers and fathers, revealing the existence of a repertoire of objects that connects parents with mourning through a daily spatial link, which is, on occasion, a relationship charged with creative and dynamic meaning. As such, these objects, together with physical spaces, are preserved or created by parents who incorporate them into their lives, defining them as spaces of existence, presence or absence, making them shared, liveable places.

The continuity of living in the spaces that a loved one once occupied becomes an experience of re-inhabiting, of reconstructing the environment. An experience of newly adopting a space and being able to do things there that define and determine it.

**Key words:** *Bereavement. Evocative objects. Grief. Meaning reconstruction, Parents. Qualitative research.*

### Resumen

Repertorios de objetos evocadores de recuerdos en madres y padres que perdieron hijos. Tenerife. España.

Este estudio cualitativo, de enfoque fenomenológico, explora el uso de objetos evocadores de recuerdos que son conservados por madres y, en duelo por la muerte de sus hijos. Estos objetos facilitan un acercamiento a esos hijos que ya no están. En el análisis de los mismos, prestamos especial atención a la comprensión de sus descripciones y a los significados atribuidos por madres y padres, lo cual revela la existencia de un

repertorio de objetos que vincula a los padres con su luto mediante una conexión diaria, espacial y que, en ocasiones, es una relación cargada de significado, creativa y dinámica. Así, dichos objetos, junto a los espacios físicos, son conservados y contruidos por los padres, quienes posibilitan su habitabilidad, siendo demarcados como territorios de existencia, de presencia o de ausencia, para hacer de los mismos lugares vivibles compartidos.

Seguir viviendo en los espacios por los que transitó el ser querido se convierte en una experiencia de re-habitar, de reconstruir el ambiente. Una experiencia para apropiarse de nuevo de dicho espacio y poder realizar en él actividades que lo definan y determinen.

Pensar en la muerte, en la modernidad, requiere pensar también en términos arquitectónicos, en términos de espacios, objetos y lugares que se caracterizan, entre otras cosas, por ser lugares en los que se dan relaciones organismo-entorno y organismo-objeto, espacios de encuentro, delimitados, en los que se construyen evidencias a través del tiempo y el espacio

**Palabras clave:** *Duelo. Investigación cualitativa. Luto. Objetos evocadores. Padres. Reconstrucción de significados.*

### Introduction

The present study was undertaken in order to explore the use of objects, or collections of objects, by mothers and fathers who had lost children and to look for the meaning of the use of such objects in the mourning process, and their categorisation.

Our personal and professional experience has enabled us to have access to people who are living through the grieving process. A long, silent, painful, and personal journey, embodied in the stories and spaces that parents who have lost children pass through, and to which the present study aims to give voice. Entering into their private worlds, in their social conversations and their living spaces, and in doing so analysing the ceremonies

around them, which allowed us to rethink the processes of mourning, and the meaning brought to spaces in memory, the pillars of which are represented by objects and collections: photographs, tattoos, cemeteries, virtual memorials, public and private altars.

After the analysis of transcribed interviews and different meetings in the parents' private spaces: homes, cemeteries, etc., we confirmed the use of objects as elements evoking memories. The role that the parents' imagination plays is important and positive in the development and management of the process of grieving, so too the meaning given to it, proven by the consistency between the findings of this study and existing contributions from related studies concerning the employment and preservation of objects as intermediaries in the relationship with deceased children [42,43,44,36-39,31,13,14, 9,10]. Thus, this research supports the theory that the use of a collection of objects by grieving mothers and fathers enables them to access the internalised dimension of their children, a relationship which mourners identify as rewarding. The fragments of the stories that we have considered relate to parents, living in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, who had lost children and who, throughout the period 2007 to 2010, participated, for the most part, as members of bereavement groups or were interviewed by the authors. Of these meetings, a sample of 50 grieving parents was selected, the informants, of which 28 were women and 22 men. The parents who lost children at birth or in childhood (up to 18 years) were aged between 30 and 35 years, and those who had lost children over 18 and under 26 years of age, were aged between 50 and 55 years.

These meetings allowed us to get closer to the understanding of pain throughout the grieving process, the continuity of the parents' links with their deceased children and the configuration of the meanings that connected them with objects, spaces, places and the meanings that enabled them to remember their children, something that we explore in more depth later. In turn, we looked at the rituals developed by mothers and fathers in the honouring and remembrance of their children, as well as the differences demonstrated in the expression of mourning and the meaning for themselves and the world, and the importance of all this in the understanding of the grieving process [8].

At first, the parents remembered their deceased children every day, integrating the pain into their daily routine so that it formed part of everything that took place, including the hardship of recounting the event. In an environment where men take less time to return to work, they can distract themselves and ease the pain by getting back into the usual work routine, as if doing routine things were a kind of balm. In contrast, mothers find their child in family spaces, sounds, light, songs, and in

everything around them. They express feelings and emotions more deeply, which causes them to live the emotional distancing from their child differently, encouraging them to return more frequently and with greater intensity to the spaces and objects that once belonged to their child, at a time that returns to the present in every moment. So, after a few months, when the men saw their partners crying, or saw how they passed through the spaces and cared for objects that belonged to their children, they thought that they were getting worse, and mentioned it to the investigator.

The parents preserved the spaces and the materiality of objects that belonged to their children, metaphorically speaking, as if they were unaffected by time, and did not experience the effects of ageing. Meaningful objects that spoke of the children, immutable, in which space and time were one and the same thing.

Commemorating, or creating sanctuaries or altars, is indeed a common custom among parents, but also in many traditional cultures all over the world [18] that explains how the intentional arrangement of objects creates a special place for reflection and healing. It makes it easier to create your own sanctuary, so that everything appears to be organised through ceremonies, evoking the meaning of death or the passing of a deceased child, and can be transformed into the sanctuary. A sanctuary of decisions in the form of art, collections, organised things, and meaningful objects: "Candles and flowers may be put on an altar or in a chapel, particularly on special days or anniversaries, and may include poems or small works of art".

Parents are the protagonists of symbolic stories exchanged with the deceased child, on a journey of reconstruction towards a "new normal", towards recovery. It's a framework in which the personal and family itineraries of the bereaved are built, charged with the meanings they are looking for, the longing for a reunion, giving meaning to their personal and social world that has been transformed by the loss [1,5,6,7, 21,22,23,24,34].

The 50 parents, informants and members of a grieving group in Tenerife called *Forever in my Heart*, that had lived through the experience of losing a child, had not mourned the death of their children, except in two cases, and, although they referred to the death of a child as the most painful experience of their lives, they had not expressed their pain in the colour of their clothes, as was the social norm in the Canaries, no longer than 30 years ago, but rather through talking and their behaviour. Many mothers and fathers at first, and sometimes for years, preserve the spaces that belonged to their children in "mummified" [11] used the term metaphorically, alluding to the practice of the Egyptians, who embalmed the body and buried it with personal effects and household items that the

deceased would need in the afterlife. This phenomenon in western societies represents the more or less conscious belief that the deceased will return, and the desire exists to assure that they will be welcomed in the appropriate manner when they return. In this way, mummification is, at least at first, a logical corollary of that belief. However, this phenomenon could continue, because to abandon such a belief would be tantamount to sealing and filing the loss, something which mourners very often are not prepared to accept.

### **Bonding with the Child's Objects**

Bonding with objects that belonged to the deceased is more common in the period immediately after the death, in early mourning, because it supports the memory of the presence of the child, although with the evocation of emotions and painful stimuli, it contributes to the development of meanings and transactions that occur in the reconstruction of the personal and social universe, challenged by the loss [13, 14, 15, 19, 28, 36-39, 45]

Most of the bereaved parents reported having objects or events that linked them to their loved ones. Most frequently, as we shall see, they are physical objects that represent the loved one or belonged to them, and, on many occasions, they symbolise a representation of the deceased as a paragon of virtue. The understanding, therefore, of the universe of the objects belonging to mothers and fathers who have lost children is achieved through the objects themselves, and that understanding is, in turn, converted into the parents' sensory perception, which connects them with the world, objects, knowledge, nature, and with the deceased children. The meaning and knowledge of social and cultural life begin to accumulate against a perceptive background. Internal and external, essence and existence, reality and imagination intertwined. Meanwhile, the parents' contemplative look, full of "twists and turns", focuses on the deceased child, in a complex and mobile world woven with the visibility of the child, wearing an invisibility cloak, which gives meaning to the Pascal quote "can only be seen by both the heart and the mind".

Contact is a form of relationship between the senses, the child's image, their objects, a sensory link between a sense and an object in a sensory field, a relational property that involves one or more of the six senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch and thought), a material or perceived object, and consciousness based on both [34]. Sensitivity is understood to occur as a dynamic process that generates contact as cause and effect simultaneously. As a cause, contact is the conjunction of a sense, an object, and the potential for conscience. As an effect, contact is what results from this process of conjunction, whose relationship is not the property of a sense or an

object, nor of consciousness itself, but a property of the processes by which they interact.

Photographs present in different spaces serve as a "substitute for presence" which helps to facilitate a paradigm reconstructed family [27]. Regarding the substitution of the loved one with a new object [35], the object is vested with meaning, to deal with the loss, as if it were a survival mechanism where objects and photographs offer the parents an opportunity to revive and relive the memories and happenings in the past, as they evoke vivid images of their lost child so that the parents can establish an internal dialogue with their child. Although the attachment and the strong symbolic charge that objects and spaces transmit are considerable, mothers and fathers realise that they can never replace the physical loss.

The use of a repertoire of objects and photographs works by seeking to remember the deceased child and helping to build and create a "durable biography" in which the memory of the deceased is relocated and reintegrated into the lives of those who remain. Family and friends of the deceased renegotiate the biography with their loved ones, as is it were a "previous chapter", and reconstruct the memories that they have of them. So the aim of the objective of this new lesson is "not to go on without those have died, keeping them in a place created for them" [40].

The feeling, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, arises from contact and is based on one of the senses, and, through that, the mothers and fathers face the world with phenomenological language. From this sensation, the aspiration could arise, in its most basic form, that it is the desire for the pleasant and the rejection of the unpleasant. Feelings are important for parents and, in those "difficult" moments, they change constantly. A wide gradation of impulses could be established: passion-desire for desirable objects, aggression-fury for undesirable objects and hope-ignorance for neutral objects. To be conscious of them, grieving parents must connect with objects using their senses, in order to have feelings and sensations. So there is no opposition between the visible and the invisible: the visible is what is shown of the invisible. A "repertoire" of objects which behaves in this way makes an appearance "the vision is a mirror or concentration of the universe" [20].

The objective of this qualitative anthropological study, with a phenomenological focus, is explore the use of objects that evoke memories by mothers and fathers mourning the death of their children. We pay particular attention to understanding their description and the meaning that they have for the parents. With this aim we catalogued and identified five categories: 1- Objects belonging to those who had died; 2- A representation of the deceased: photographs; 3- Sounds or music; 4- Smells, flavours, foods; and 5- Outside spaces.

### Material and methods

This is a qualitative anthropological study, with a phenomenological focus, which explores the use of objects that evoke memories held by mothers and fathers mourning the death of their children. In the analysis of these objects, we pay particular attention to understanding their description and the meaning that they have for the parents, revealing the existence of a repertoire of objects that connects parents with mourning through a daily spatial link, which is, on occasion, a relationship charged with creative and dynamic meaning.

The fragments of the stories that we have considered relate to parents living in Santa Cruz de Tenerife who had lost children and who were interviewed by the authors.

### Results and Discussion

An initial analysis of the narrative data, together with observation of spaces and objects that are preserved by the grieving mothers and fathers, revealed many mourning objects that we catalogued and identified in the following categories:

1. Objects belonging to those who had died (car, jewellery, watches, clothes, etc.), that the deceased used as an extension of meaning (telephone, camera), that were to hand, or were places visited or frequented by the deceased child.
2. A representation of the deceased: photographs in the form of paper prints, on pendants, printed on fabric cushions, on posters, pictures, plaques; digitalised or video compilations of photographs, tattoos with a meaning related to the deceased child.
3. Sounds, or music of singers or groups that the deceased listened to, or the lyrics or music of songs that, for the parents, evoke a story associated with their child.
4. Smells, flavours, foods, or numbers associated with places or with the some element associated with the deceased child: the number of the cot or bed where the child was in hospital, the day of the month, etc.
5. Outside spaces, old or new, constructed in a place having something to do with the deceased child: places where they lived or walked, whether still in their mother's womb (infants or stillborn) or on their own feet; places in which they studied, worked or where they died (chapels of rest); also where the ashes were, or are to be scattered, or symbolic spaces where a memorial was held.

Although a single object may be identified by different mourners, there is no equivalence when comparing the meanings attributed to it by different people. The identification of the same object, therefore, in no way predicts the dimensions of meaning that might be associated with it, since the meaning and associations attributed by mothers and fathers could be totally different.

An analysis of the some of the opinions and reflections of the participants provides a series of responses about how the parents remain connected with their children, it can also be seen how this relationship with objects, and their emotional importance, evolves with time, so that some increase in importance in the relationship with the deceased child, whilst others lose their significance over time.

The intensity of the parents' mourning, of great importance in the mothers' and fathers' chain of causation, can, at this point, cut the "chain" or let it pass to the next link, leading to an attachment or clinging to spaces and objects and, therefore, the children they represent.

"Places, songs and my house.... make me relive the pain." (Rosario).

"All the things he had are upstairs, just as he left them: the computer, the guitar. His trousers are still where he left them." (Concha).

The expression and the communication of feelings, especially pain, need to bind specifically to certain objects of marked symbolism, as in a relationship with the sacred, totem-like. A ritual relationship of men and women with their totem, with their deceased child [17].

As with collectors, parents are driven by passion which, if it seems dedicated to the present, is linked with a perception of the past, which not only tries to make sense of the child's life, but also seeks affirmation by the child itself, in the perception of their gaze or face in the objects present, sometimes an affirmation more random than general.

This gives rise to a "repertoire of elements", of different categories and meanings, related to the deceased child, adapting to whatever space, or new or old objects, that are capable of evoking or bringing meaning into the real or transcendental world around the child, that, through the effort to preserve them, lead mothers and fathers to attachment.

The attachment to objects marks a diffuse psychic limit between the deceased and the mourner, as a representation of the two individuals, in which a part of them emerges externally through their use. It is a culture that shapes the lives and deaths of its members, confers meaning to actions and imposes inherent patterns on symbolic systems through the interdependent modalities of language, speeches, and behaviour; where their absence is considered "abnormal": to sleep in the child's former bed, wear a pendant that belonged to them, or earrings, photographs, their scarf, cap, etc., are recurring elements among mothers and fathers; lighting candles in certain spaces, because they remind us of the presence of our loved one, or as Isabel says, "because their child liked to light them"; to walk through places that they used to frequent with their loved one, listen to their favourite music, or do so in the car or motorbike just as they used to.



Pain matures, and as time passes, parents feel less need to be in contact with objects that they are linked to, but the objects do not remain beyond their awareness or knowledge. As Lydia, Ariana, Fatima, Yayi and Gabriela reported, they decided to put together and keep a box of collected objects related to their children who had died very few days after being born. The reason was not so much the search for evocation, but the possibility to form a collection, just as we preserve love letters or wedding photographs. They claimed that with time, the presence of their children moved from the external reality of the objects to a more internal feeling of presence.

Ceremonial acts, on occasion, try to change the state of the world in which the deceased child continues to be present after their death, by means of remote actions [16] that explain, predict and control that world. Where, for some parents, the belief in coincidences and the action of supernatural agents that inhabit the world exists. This evidences the confusion between imagination and reality for those who associate themselves with thoughts of phenomena fed by desires and fantasies, a connection that is made through the practice of rituals, as we have mentioned, illustrated by Lourdes who lost her 18 year old daughter through sudden death:

“And that same night the weight was lifted from us, we were liberated.

The night that Gara died we were having a barbecue by the sea. While we were eating, a sudden wind blew up. And just a moment before, I had called Gara [she must have died shortly afterwards]. I went for a walk and then the wind blew up and we had to pack up the camp. We all went to sleep.

Our friends from Uruguay said that she had died when the wind blew up and that “we had to let something go”. I felt dead scared because I didn’t like that place. The place needed something to make it more peaceful [to pacify it]. Like her [my daughter] freeing herself. I did it to believe in something: we took her comb and a white quartz crystal [an amulet] with which she always had in her hand when studying. I lit a candle, we threw away the objects and at that moment the candle went out, and a glow, that you could at the bottom, also soon went out” (Lourdes).

The metaphorical objects that speak of Gara, her comb and her white quartz crystal, work as elements of a descriptive nature through signs that configure a sequence of cause-effect of the death and the place, and that are able to set off consequences remotely. The resultant action follows a means-end pattern, being the expressive mythological or pseudological action in the meaning as in religious belief.

The meanings given to the world constantly speak about the deceased child and they are impregnated

with their death, absence and the meanings of presence. They foster the implication of a holistic state of flux, which implies a “voluntary suspension of disbelief” [32-33] from which neither people nor places are immune and where ritual language has a performative force capable of producing conventional effects [4, 25,26,3,29,46].

The custom of votive candles is nothing new. They were common in catholic southern Germany, where candles were lit and offered to certain saints for the protection of women worried about pregnancy and birth. In the same way, objects used in private creative ceremonies do not need to be considered religious or exotic. They are simple symbols, photographs and objects that have a personal meaning and that can add greater meaning to the experience.

Felipe and Fatima, who lost their son Enzo, created a repertoire of ceremonies each night before going to bed: blowing a kiss to their son represented by a photograph, or “Benito” his favourite toy, a soft-toy horse. Looking at the *Remembrance Book* that included the story of his short life, keeping a candle almost permanently lit next to a framed photograph of their son and the urn that contained his ashes.

Jorge prolonged his daughter’s identity referring to the way she liked the house to be at Christmas, and her preferred food:

“At Christmas, this house is going to be illuminated just how she liked it” (Jorge, 2009).

“The food that she loved [...] I have a frozen joint there, with black-pudding, chorizo... It’s hers. I just can’t do it. The food that I bought for her that weekend (that she died), I threw it all away.” (Jorge).

A week later, the father prepared the roast as he always had, he prepared his daughter’s favourite meal, and the three members of the family ate it. It was a step forward for him to do it, a commemorative act full of meaning that he repeated a month and a half later, that permitted them as a family to feel that they were making more progress coming to terms with their loss and getting nearer to their daughter.

“It was one more step, to do meals or things that she liked without her. It was one more step... I’m beginning to see the steps” (Jorge).

Mothers and fathers who have lost young children don’t necessarily become linked to objects that are soon forgotten, like toys or flowers. It is more to do with spaces such as the home, the workplace, schools, and understanding them, that nowadays comprise different grieving environments, that have become modified over time in terms of understanding, function, and organisation, from older urban and rural societies to more complex, modern ones. Clearly conditioned by modern culture and rituals of remembrance, the understanding of those spaces provides a tool for understanding the grieving dynamic, and allows us

to understand behaviours in these separate worlds of work, school, and the family home.

Objects behave as mediators for the memory, melancholic objects, as objects of remembrance that anchor memories of the absence of the deceased child. Their clothes, shoes, watches, glasses, soft toys, blankets, etc., they work through metaphor or metonymy as bodily impressions or as an extension of their bodies, surviving their owners, their possessors.

“I have all the teeth that Maite lost. She was saving them. I have them in a jewellery box” (Ana).

They play a role in the life of their child, after their death, they play an important role in mourning, in the life of their parents, rooted in meanings of the identity of the deceased and their life story. The tendency is not to “mummify” or preserve them intact, as for many that speaks of not feeling good, of not being normal, and that it is least desirable. Because of this, those who avoid grief or mourning, essentially parents who lost children at or before birth, prefer to avoid objects, disposing of them or storing them before returning home, including, on occasion, rapidly and without any prior selection of things that might have had some value for them, thus casting them aside to be forgotten forever.

Many objects act together as a “repertoire”, as a group of objects that transcends their value, becoming works of art and devotion, that on more than one occasion go on to be considered sacred by mothers and fathers, for they revive the very essence of the matter: the deceased child, their presence and their memory. They confirm an important triad of concepts for the understanding of the personal journeys that give meaning to grief and the deceased loved one: objects, spaces and time.

The clothes that belonged to the deceased, that sheltered their body, that made them more beautiful, that protected them, are, without the parents wishing it, emotionally linked to them. Much more so, in the first few days, weeks and months after the death.

It is mainly the mothers of older deceased children who are more linked to objects, rather than fathers, who prefer to avoid them or to reduce the dose of them:

“Her clothes are still hard for me (referring to her deceased daughter’s clothes), it tortures me” (Jorge).

The journey of mourning is a path of objects, images and meanings: the image of the living child, the images of their dead body, the images that surrounded them in life, the images of events that marked their life and funeral, the photographic and video images as objects of memory. They, all of them, are definitively “melancholic” images, that make the mothers and fathers feel that their children are still with them.

Photographs are the main objects that principally link mothers to deceased children. On occasion,

they make a photograph album, methodically and chronologically, collecting as many as thousands of photographs, as an animated repertoire, capturing the essential moments in their lives.

Nostalgia, tears and smiles accompany the viewing of these photographs or videos that speak of life and past events that can be relived and examined, detail by detail, including, in the case of children who died at birth or a few days after, for those children who only a few photographs exist to the faithful testimony of their life and death. They appear in their parents’ arms, as in the case of Lydia and Luis, after the death of their twins, or together with a brother (in the case of Diego). These images, for many, speak of another time when taking photographs of the deceased was “normal”. The appearance and image of being “asleep” causes parents to question the meaning of life and the reason for death. Or in moments of celebration and enjoyment, with smiles and parties, in the case of adult deceased children.

Mothers and fathers showed us photographs of their deceased children in the group meetings or in interviews: albums, photographs saved on a computer, on mobile phones, in wallets, and in specially created virtual spaces (websites)... There are no limits to this, nor any medium that is not used. They are images that, during the interview and interaction, were kissed or held close to the heart.

“I have even taken out my photo of my daughter when watching the sunrise, or called her phone number” (Ana).

When we visited their houses, there were images of their children in every corner and important place: on the computer screen, the bedside table, in the lounge, in their old bedroom, on the fridge door, above specially made personal altars. Hundreds of images in different formats that linked parents and children, or perhaps, to be more exact, mothers and children, because the link which fathers establish with objects and images of their deceased children is different, we could say that the dose is not the same. For them, the “tolerated and desired” dose is lower and, generally, they seek to separate themselves from certain objects and images, avoiding looking at many photos or videos, not often going into the child’s old bedroom, as the mothers do, or looking at the clothes that belonged to them. This is the reason why the mothers, on occasion, say that the fathers are finding it “harder” than they do, coming to terms with the loss of their child. Whilst the mothers like to spend hours doing these kinds of things, fathers, when they do, do them less frequently.

Transitional, mediating and inanimate objects link the mourning parents with their children, giving them a psychic or emotional boost. An “added value” that invites them to be preserved, and that sometimes also grants them an “almost magical”

status, the focus of all of the parents' looks, gestures, caresses or kisses, that can also convert them into providers of protection or help.

While pain can change its meaning with links to the deceased child, objects are converted into mediators for the commemoration of mourning. For that reason, depending on the object and the relationship it bears with the deceased, emotions can be evoked in the parents and they may experience grief in a different way. Some express it in a form where it seemed that they were never going to break the link with sorrow, with the emotional drain of sadness or longing that unites objects with the loved one that they have promised never to forget.

"I took my daughter's clothes to a dressmaker, and had them altered to fit me, now I wear them myself" (Toñy).

A lot of parents keep many objects secretly: a ring, a watch, photographs, or also objects that were close by at the moment of death. They were kept especially, but not used: a nappy, a gauze, the infant's Intensive Care Unit identity band, etc. They are objects that are looked at occasionally, in private.

For some parents, principally those who have lost adult children, the presence and use of objects appears to stimulate contact with characteristics or attributes of the personality of the deceased child, or their tastes or opinions on any matter. We must highlight some characteristics in particular of some children, that the parents started to identify in themselves after the death of their children. So that significant objects mediate, on occasion, the parents' connection, or reciprocity, with some aspect of the child's personality.

"My son was very interested in defending the environment and campaigning against the wrongs committed against it. Now I'm not only aware of this extreme defence, but also share the vision that he had, which, when he was alive, I didn't value" (Isabel).

The conservation of spaces that belonged to a child and their ordered maintenance, as "mummified spaces", is common, although men, at first, hesitate more than women in preserving them intact and, on many occasions, when such rooms were awaiting a child that was never born, it's the men who converted them before their partner's return home, as they considered that preserving them over time would cause unnecessary pain. Of the 25 deceased children, the parents of five (10) kept "memory boxes" and the parents of ten (20) kept "mummified rooms". Of the remaining parents (20), half maintained personal altars in their homes.

When we visited their homes, we found ourselves inside unaltered spaces, kept as if they were waiting for the arrival or return of a deceased child, where time, movement and change did not exist. Usually maintained by the mother, we saw an abundance of elements being kept and remembered: "His room

was suddenly just as he left it". Like a photo finish [2].

"I want to be alone in my son's room and just read. In the room where his ashes are and the candle is lit" (Angeles).

In the case of deceased new-born children or children only a few months old, children that had never been in their own bedrooms, and those that never shared the spaces of their own homes, the spaces that awaited them, with the objects and the clothes that were created for them and with them in mind, also assume another meaning linked with the children.

Also certain objects and interior and exterior spaces are converted into spaces of hope and disappointment. A path somewhere between the pain of the child's absence and the creation of meanings that link the parents with the child.

"When we are "down", we hug each other, we go for a walk and we go to Candelaria (a village in the east of the island), which we now associate greatly with her" (Dulce).

Main objects that link mothers (22) and fathers (12) to the deaths of their children throughout the process of mourning: objects, images, music, food, spaces, etc., with which they remembered their deceased children: Objects belonging to the deceased: car, jewellery, watches, clothes, etc., or which the deceased used as an extension of the senses (telephone, camera), or that were to hand or in places that the deceased child passed through or visited; A representation of the deceased, that could be photographic, in different formats: paper prints, pendants; printed on textile cushions, posters, pictures, plaques, etc. Digital video or photographic formats. Tattoos with a significance relating to the deceased child; Sounds or music of singers or groups that the deceased listened to, or with lyrics or music that remind the parents of a story that they associate with their child; Smells, flavours, food, or numbers that are associated with or have something to do with places or some element associated with the deceased child: the number of the child's hospital cot, etc.; Outside spaces, old or new, constructions in places that had something to do with the deceased child: places where they lived, places they passed by – whether still in their mother's stomachs (infants or stillborn) or on their own feet. Places where they studied, worked or where they died (chapels of rest); also places where their ashes were scattered or where it is intended to do so. Symbolic spaces (memorials), etc.

#### *Linking with New Places and New Objects*

Our society clearly defines the boundaries of grief, confining it to private spaces or an inner world. Despite this, the experience of pain is lived in "external" spaces. Work, schools, or universities are places of interaction for parents with personal grief, from the diversity and complexity shown by

those living with it, and by their way of understanding concepts such as “grief”, “external expression of grief”, “normality” and “recovery”. It is these spaces, public and job-related, that condition behaviour developed by parents [41].

#### *Cemeteries*

Most parents who lose children at birth, or a few days after, cremate their bodies, and the rest bury them. It is the latter that visit cemeteries, above all at first, in a ritual in which the mothers take the lead. Later, the visits become less frequent over the months and years, becoming increasingly limited to specific dates. The first visits to the cemetery begin a few days after the death, becoming part of the mothers’ routine, on certain days and times, although for those working, where they have lost adult children, the visits are usually on the weekends. They go to visit their graves, although they confess to us, that for them, “their children” are not there.

The mothers’ memory is more global, whilst that of the men is more fragmented, becoming forgotten in the silence of death. The men who talk about their deceased children every day are few, other than to a few members of the support group or researchers and, when they do, they refer to what their wives have said. The wives, inside and outside these spaces, are more inclined to a symbolic, nostalgic time - of recalling their children - while the men get on with taking care of the daily routine. Their silence and their behaviour, serve to eliminate nostalgia and impose the daily routine in contrast to the mothers’ sobs or tears, and their conversations. There is a masculine-feminine contrast in society, Canarian society, in which there is increasingly less of a gender difference in political and public life. This leads to a fundamental question to be considered that funereal ideology is at the meeting point of a double-game of forces, on the one hand, the drives and ghosts of the universal subconscious; and on the other, the determinants linked to demographic, political and socio-economic roots [30].

In rural areas the tradition is more rooted in the grave and its care than in urban areas. When it is the men who visit them, they do so in silence and are less likely to display their emotions.

#### *Altars and Shrines*

Thousands of altars and shrines, set up in places where accidents happened, mainly at the roadside, form part of the popular and shared iconography along the length of the main roads that connect the different villages of the Canary Islands: rural and local roads, main roads and highways. Some are cared for and are maintained, others look abandoned. Some with real flowers, others with plastic ones, and those who create them hope that they will be seen, and wonder who might stop and look at them.

Altars work as signals that remind us that someone lost their life in that place in an unforeseen and

unfortunate accident. They are shrines or milestones at the roadside that serve as a permanent reminder of a death, they mark and signal an event and the memory of a loved one. These sites have been converted into “sacred” places for the “soul” of the loved one “departed to another life”.

We found one such, that commemorates Tony, on the road to Tablero (TF-28), at kilometre 4. At first, after the fatal accident on 22 April, 2008, flowers were left at the site on the side of the road. Gradually, the place became more of a funereal ritual site, being more and more cared for, and growing in size. Africa’s family, her mother, took up the ritual of visiting it, taking care of it and of doing so twice a week to look after and decorate the “hermitage”, as it is known. We found a gabled niche there, covered with flowers, consisting of two internal compartments, in which different objects were placed, with meaning for those who had left them there; friends and strangers, who sometimes left a variety of things such as photographs, a rosary, coins, saints, etc., in memory. Africa always keeps a candle lit inside the “hermitage”.

“If I don’t go, I feel bad. And I say to my husband: - Go to the hermitage, go to the cemetery. [...] I find him there, I sit down and talk to him. It’s like something I have to do. He’s important to me. Just where he fell on the road, I give him a kiss right there. It’s as if I am drinking his blood. And I know that he is with me. If he wasn’t with me, I wouldn’t be here. And I tell him: Give me the strength to carry on” (Africa).

#### **Conclusions**

This study examines the phenomenon of the use of a repertoire of objects by grieving mothers and fathers throughout the length of the process of mourning the death of their children. The uses and meanings are as diverse as the objects themselves, or if we speak about spaces, more than the total number of them. Despite that, the diversity of the uses and meanings can be understood through the dimensions of the relationship, and the continuity of the links with the children.

In this way, contact with the objects provides a means of access to the dimensions of the materno-filial/paterno-filial relationship which is otherwise difficult to reach. Likewise, for the parents, the objects also act as a means that facilitates the continuity of links for the reconstruction and conversion of the relationship.

Some parents claim to have an ambivalent relationship with some objects that belonged to their children, as Lourdes, Ariana and Jorge told us, a dynamic tension that they relate to the idea of preserving or letting go. Whilst there are objects that mothers and fathers cling to completely in every case, such as photographs of their children.

We can conclude that for the majority of parents, the act of preserving and being close to the objects



that they associate with their children throughout the mourning process facilitates the building and formation of a different relationship, that in their words exists mainly internally and which grows over time and with bonding to certain objects.

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