

# **Phenomenology of leisure travel following death of a loved one**

## **Abstract**

This paper advances knowledge around the intersection of death, loss, and leisure travel. Our phenomenological study revealed the lived experiences of seven senior travellers who had travelled internationally following the death of a loved one(s). We employed the ‘MeBox’ method to help uncover new layers of meaning that are not always easy to put into words. The findings of our study provide new insights into notions of leisure by identifying overseas leisure travel within a liminal space in which feelings of loss and acceptance, and the creation of new perspectives, are experienced following the death of a loved one(s). Our findings challenge the destructive nature of human loss following death of a loved one(s). Instead, the experience of international travel appeared to influence the social, material, and existential life of senior travellers after the death of a loved one(s), transforming leisure into a personally meaningful experience for them.

## **Keywords**

Death and leisure travel, loss, liminality, senior travellers, phenomenology, ‘MeBox’ method

## **Introduction**

The death of one’s life partner is recognised as one of the most destructive human losses possible (Bennett, 1997). Yet, there remains a dearth of understanding about what this sense of loss implies in leisure travel. Death in the leisure literature tends to be perceived negatively, as a dark time that can limit an individual’s freedom to enjoy, celebrate or engage in travel (Fox & McDermott, 2021). Instead, leisure travel is commonly associated with agency, pleasure, freedom, and time away from work activities (Chick, 2016; Pereira & Stagnitti, 2008). However, leisure travel, especially international travel to new and unfamiliar environments, can also provide an avenue

for people to gain time away from their everyday activities and surroundings for reflecting on self (White & White, 2004). As such, leisure can sometimes accompany death, as it provides spaces for grief, celebration, and reflection (Fox & McDermott, 2021; Willson et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study sought to contribute new insights into leisure as a space for grief and loss through a phenomenological enquiry of the lived experiences of leisure travel for senior travellers following the death of a loved one(s).

The terms 'loss' and 'death' are often used interchangeably and while they do overlap, there are some points of difference to consider with these terms. Loss can be temporary or permanent, can occur through an individual's decision making or via a third party's, and can result from wider structural circumstances, such as redundancy or forced migration; and, like death, individuals experience and interpret loss differently (Kaul & Skinner, 2018). The death of a loved one(s) is permanent, has negative connotations, with long-term difficulties for the remaining living partner. These challenges for the remaining partner could range from managing wider societal expectations, to being able to communicate or find the 'right' language to describe their feelings and describe their experiences to others (Wenzel et al., 2011). Reaching a senior life stage, more than any other age group, tends to expose individuals to the likelihood of experiencing loss of their loved one(s) (Kim, 2009). As a result, seniors are found to seek meaningful changes and (re)shape priorities in their life and try to spend their remaining lifetime effectively (Balk, 1999; Matthews & Marwit, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Accordingly, insights into the lived experiences of seniors can contribute important new understandings to leisure as a space for grief and loss.

While there are clinical definitions of death based on set criteria, we note that cultural and religious conceptions of death can be interpreted differently depending on the individual, cultural, and religious perspectives of the community (Kaul & Skinner, 2018). For instance, in his work

examining cultural understandings of death, Gire (2004) notes that some “South Pacific cultures believe that life [...] departs the body of a person [...] when one is ill or asleep” ( p. 4). There can also be differing wider social implications of death and loss for the individual that can add to their stress (Fox, 2021). Conflict, lack of clarity over their new identity, status change, and an expectation of recovering from the traumatic event and returning to their everyday lives, all contribute to the trauma and healing processes (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Kivel & Johnson, 2009; Packman et al., 2006). There has been a call for scholarship to embrace further understandings of loss and death so that our investigations of leisure are a “creative rethinking and re-figuration of our understandings of the meaning of leisure with death in mind” (Fernandez, 2018, p. 299). This study examining leisure travel by senior travellers after the death of a loved one(s) offers a contribution towards this goal.

## **Literature Review**

Death is an inevitable part of life and previous research in leisure and tourism studies has explored the subject of death and loss in various contexts. Studies examining leisure within contexts of emotional loss, terminal illness, dementia, ageing and risk-based leisure activities have identified that being immersed in a nature-based and/or supportive leisure environment can assist individuals to reconstruct new realities and a new sense of self (Harmon, 2019). Ridgway (2022), for example, examined leisure activities, emotions and meaning gained through participation in nature to understand the role leisure can play in assisting recovery after the trauma of divorce for migrant women. In other areas of leisure scholarship, research focusing on cancer patients has identified that engaging in movement, and various social activities, especially those that are reflective and existential, can empower individuals as they develop transformational perspectives on their new sense of self and move towards acceptance (Harmon, 2019; Janke et al., 2008; Reid et al., 2023).

The general benefits of participation in leisure, such as psychological and health-related benefits and experiences for positive well-being, overcoming loneliness, and helping to cope with major life stresses in life, are well reported (Axelsen, 2009; Engberg et al., 2012; Schmidt & Little, 2005). Previous studies focusing on leisure activities after the death of a loved one(s) have found that participating in social leisure helped alleviate isolation, provide social connections for support, and contributed to a widower's capacity to cope with life changes and gain self-efficacy (Janke et al., 2008; Patterson & Carpenter, 1994). Leisure participation can be helpful for the maintenance of a positive morale, particularly among senior citizens who had experienced the death of a loved one(s) (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). Indeed, leisure travel can function as a liminal space that involves "temporal rituals of leaving, moving and returning" in unfamiliar environments (Fullagar, 2002, p. 59). Within this liminal space, transformation can occur for the international traveller (Foster & McCabe, 2015; Pritchard & Morgan, 2006). The concept of liminality has previously been used to describe the in-between stage where people become separated from existing social structures (Turner, 1997). Essentially, liminality theory is about change and how individuals manage these transitions and react to wider structures, discourses, and ideologies to reconstruct meaning and their self-identity (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). We posit that this theory is useful for examining the lived experiences of loss during leisure travel following the death of a loved one(s).

The theory of liminality comes from Arnold van Gennep's anthropological work that endeavoured to understand transitions, and investigated rituals and rites observed in societies and their relationship to the dynamics of individual and group life (Turner, 1997). Van Gennep noted that these customary behaviours tended to fall into three distinctive clusters, namely: separation, transition, and incorporation (Turner, 1997). Here, liminality refers to a space or a point of 'becoming' in people's lives where they are neither one thing nor another, or maybe both (Turner, 1997). For instance, Thomassen (2016) suggested that "whenever previously existing borders or

limits are lifted away or dissolve into fundamental doubt, the liminal presents itself with a challenge: how to cope with this uncertainty? Who can lead us out of here? How so? What is my own role in this chaos?" (p. 2). In this liminal space the person's everyday routines, norms and expectations can be set aside, "taken apart, recomposed and regenerated" (Thomassen, 2016, p. 38). Finally, during the incorporation stage, the individual is brought back into society and attains a new or higher status (Froggatt, 1997).

Researchers have used liminality to understand a variety of spaces and environments where threshold, transitional or in-between stages occur (Underthun & Jordhus-Lier, 2018). Recent work on liminality has considered a more nuanced approach where liminality may occur over a set period of time, or an indefinite longer period of time. Alkhaled and Sasaki's (2022) research, for example, examined Syrian women refugees to identify "that the forcibly displaced are left in a state of 'indeterminate liminality'" (p. 1584). Studies examining long-distance running have also used liminality to understand creativity, identity and, in particular, symbols (Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2007). Lev's (2022) work examining novice long-distance runners who joined running clubs found that they had to disconnect from their old selves, habits, tastes, and relationships as these were "morally inferior" (p. 8). The symbolic aspect of liminality is crucial within the process of disconnecting and reconstructing self as "symbols are more than inert vessels that carry meaning; symbols are rich and multivocal, connoting potentially different meaning for different people" (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011, p. 523).

In the context of leisure travel, the symbolic meaning can occur, as Foster and McCabe (2015) noted, through the procedures and "processes of 'going away'" to short-stay residential camps (p. 54), or through long-term international travel (White & White, 2004) or backpacking (Matthews, 2014). Indeed, previous studies on ageing and leisure, such as those by Janke et al. (2008) and Patterson and Carpenter (1994), mentioned above, have indicated that after the death of a loved

one(s), an individual may alter the ways they connect with once-familiar activities and environments. This may prompt individuals to instead focus on themselves, to seek spaces for reflection and consider meaningful changes in their life, for instance, through participating in leisure travel (Shaw et al., 2005), especially during the senior phase of life (Kim, 2009). Indeed, there remains a dearth of consideration in this regard within extant leisure research. Yet, as reaching a senior life stage, more than any other age group, tends to expose individuals to the likelihood of experiencing loss of loved one(s), there is a need to further examine the lived experiences of seniors using leisure travel as a space to ‘get away’ following their loss from the death of their loved one(s).

## **Materials and methods**

Phenomenological research is the study of lived experiences (Fendt et al., 2014; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). It enables the worldview and subjective experiences of participants to be heard, and it helps the researcher to gain rich data on deep meanings related to human experience (Schmidt, 2005). It allows phenomena, such as personal lived experiences, to emerge naturally and in a way that is personally meaningful to research participants (Moran, 2000; Schmidt, 2005; Willis, 2001; Willson et al., 2013). This is significant for the study of loss because individuals can face difficulties in verbally expressing ideas about loss and grief, which are upsetting. Purposeful sampling was used for selecting research participants for the study because the research intent was to understand and describe a particular phenomenon from the viewpoint of those who have experienced it (Penner & McClement, 2008). Our participants were all aged 65 years or above, and whilst our study does not seek to draw attention to comparisons around age, those aged over 65 years tend to be classified as being in their senior stage of life (Hasson & Stroebe, 2007). As mentioned above, those living in their senior phase of life are more likely than other age groups to experience loss of a loved one(s) (Kim, 2009). Our participants identified that they had

experienced the death of a loved one(s) at least one year prior to the date the research was carried out and had travelled internationally within five years since the loss of their loved one(s) (see Table 1). As our study involved conversations around an issue that could trigger emotional pain and stress while participating in this research, we offered counselling support services to our participants and, importantly, we allowed the participant to manage the pace of each session. Although our participants all reportedly shared New Zealand European ethnicity, we did not compare any potential cultural or religious similarities or differences in their conceptions of death; rather their phenomenological lived accounts were most important.

Seven senior leisure travellers volunteered to participate in this study to share their lived experiences of their overseas travel. Participants were identified through a number of avenues, such as acquaintances, and through New Zealand not-for-profit organisations, including Age Concern, Salvation Army, and Aspire Community Support. These channels were used to promote information to seniors and to invite interested individuals to contact us for more details about the research, and because of the trust the first author had built within these networks through working as a volunteer. Our sample size reflected that of previous phenomenological studies to reveal rich descriptions of the lived experiences (Jennings, 2001; McIntosh, 2020; Schmidt, 2005; Willis, 2001; Willson, 2010).

Insert - Table 1 *Brief profile of the study's participants*

As the research covered sensitive, emotive events relating to the lived experiences we sought to examine, we carefully considered the appropriate methods to be used in the study. Visual methods, for instance, are deemed helpful as they can help access layers of meaning and assumptions that are not easily communicated through words (Rakic & Chambers, 2009; Rydzik et al., 2013). Visual methods are helpful for the process of idea generation, as they allow participants to think

about their experiences in ways other than the verbal mode, and to think about broader aspects of experience (Bagnoli, 2009). In addition to participant interviews, therefore, we used a visual research method called the ‘MeBox’ method to collect data from the seven senior leisure travellers as it included non-linguistic aspects (tangible objects placed in a box) to aid communication. In selecting the ‘MeBox’ method, we were aware of the significant time commitments involved for the participant and researcher, and the context of our research. This is appropriate for phenomenological research, as it is often found to include more than one data collection technique to create an account of the phenomenon (Penner & McClement, 2008). Importantly, our research needed to navigate an emotive subject for which verbal communication may be distressing. The ‘MeBox’ method was originally created by Gibbons (2010) to understand and communicate participants’ multifaceted experiences of long-term chronic illness (Gibbons, 2013). According to FitzPatrick et al. (2019), “when participants respond to ‘MeBox’ objects as direct stimuli or memory prompts, the objects can elicit the detailed oral descriptions valued by visual researchers” (p. 172).

In our study, a ‘MeBox’ was created by gathering together tangible objects that related to meaningful lived experiences of international leisure travel within the context of each participant’s loss. The ‘MeBox’ method involved three sessions. The initial session was an introductory meeting to explain the research and to build rapport. The second session started with the researcher asking participants to choose a cardboard box from a selection of coloured boxes to be their ‘MeBox’ in which to put objects. At this second session, the researcher provided a variety of objects for participants to select. The participants were free to assign their own meanings to the researcher-provided objects; for example, we provided a broken pot, and one participant expressed that the broken pot reflected the broken spots in her life. Here she was referring to losing her eye due to eye cancer. The objects we chose came mainly from around our houses, and we selected a variety of objects with different characters, colours, and shapes (as in Gibbons, 2010). We asked

participants to look through the objects we had provided and to pick any object that they felt most comfortable talking about first. At the end of the second session, the researcher invited participants to add their own objects into the 'MeBox' to reflect on their experiences and discuss in the third, final session.

By leaving the interpretations of the objects open, participants could select and add objects to their 'MeBox' that best reflected their understandings. The 'MeBox' objects facilitated the researchers' exploration of the participants' experiences, and the process enhanced our understandings of hard to express articulations of loss and travel that overcame any cultural differences between the researcher and participant. Next, we photographed the 'MeBox' objects, individually as well as collated as a group inside the box, to capture the participants' experiences of leisure travel visually. Having these photographs added further meaning to the data analysis and interpretation. The 'MeBox' method showed that, through objects, researchers could communicate a new layer of information on peoples' lived experiences in addition to what could be conveyed by words alone (Gibbons, 2013). The interview transcripts and 'MeBox' objects were combined to co-create individual phenomenological portraits. These research portraits formed a personal narrative relating to each participant that illustrated who they are, the losses they have faced recently, and their leisure travel experiences. These research portraits served the phenomenological principle of giving voice to the participants (Willson et al., 2013).

Their co-creation involved listening to the audio recordings of the interviews, looking at the photographs of the 'MeBox' objects, and reviewing the sessions (Gibbons, 2013). The first author communicated with research participants again a few months after the final interview to show them their draft portrait. Accordingly, participants highlighted any aspects they wanted to change/delete, and noted any misinterpretation or if they wanted to add anything to their portrait. In this way, we sought to validate the research by ensuring that the portraits were an outcome of

their expressions rather than our viewpoints (Gibbons, 2013). Then we used thematic analysis to analyse the phenomenological portraits to derive common themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Many scholars have previously used thematic analysis in their phenomenological studies (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Harper & Thompson, 2011; Howard, 2013; Manning, 2012; Willson, 2010; Wilson, 2012), and in research employing the ‘MeBox’ method (Elphingston-Jolly, 2012; FitzPatrick et al., 2019).

## **Results**

Our analysis of the phenomenological portraits revealed three common themes, namely, ‘experiencing liminality’, ‘creating new perspectives’ and ‘engaging in acceptance’. The key findings of this study did not seek to represent one universal truth; instead, they highlight the importance of individual experiences and subjective meanings provided by the participants, as appropriate to phenomenological methodology (Giorgi, 2009). The three emergent themes will now be described.

### ***Experiencing liminality***

The first emergent theme, ‘experiencing liminality’, revealed how participants reported that their leisure travel was undertaken at a time when their life had become a liminal space of internal reflection on their loss. The participants mentioned that, after the loss, they found themselves in an ‘in-between’ space. In this space, participants were unsure of who they now were and unclear about how to move forward with their lives. Indeed, Kelly (2008) has suggested that the liminal space created by loss can include feelings of “confusion, fear, and grief, of something having been taken away” (p. 348). People can also come to feel disorientated, sensing a loss of control over their lives and a disconnect with their current home social networks and context (Cheung, 2015; Turner, 1997). Participants in our study used words that had distinctive liminal characteristics such as ‘uncertainty’, ‘separateness’, and ‘disruption’ to describe their life after the death of the

loved one. Participants were aware of their limits in this space and became acutely aware that life is finite. For instance, Louise commented how, “It brought back to me to make the most of the moments, and to grab them with whatever you find in life comes your way.” A key challenge for participants after the loss was the realisation that life was not stable, and they did not have control over what had happened to them. Importantly, during this period, international travel was reported to have played a significant role in participants’ life as a way to symbolically transition from the loss by “getting away”.

Following the death of their loved one(s), our participants had become acutely aware of the limited boundaries in life and their limited time left to live. Awareness of reorganising self, body and boundaries were prevalent in the accounts from participants. Little et al. (1998) suggested boundedness is a characteristic of liminality, and participants’ accounts showed evidence of “boundedness” as an awareness of “limits to space” and “available time” (p. 1486). Similarly, Little et al. (1998) described boundedness as a characteristic of liminality present for patients with cancer. With loss came the reflection on and the realisation that participants had little influence over the loss.

*Figure 1: Louise’s figurine*

Louise reflected on the death of her sister through this ‘MeBox’ object, a figurine (Figure 1).

According to Louise,

It is significant to me that it came from her. I do not know where she got it or what it meant to her. It was lying down like that. I do not know whether she is meant to be swimming. I do not know whether she is meant to be diving or flying or what it is that she is doing. She is clearly not perfect. She is rough. Roughly shaped, but she looks strong, and she looks quite brave, whatever it is that she is doing. So quite curious, like she is looking to do something more.

Louise's reflections after the death of her sister reaffirmed that she had to make the most of the time that she had left to live as "it talks to me about the need to absolutely make the most of the time that you have." Travelling overseas became an important activity to allow her to reflect on the change in her life, make the most of the limited time she felt she had left and to reconstruct meaning for herself. Travelling to a different unfamiliar environment allowed her to observe others and reflect, to try to reconstruct meanings in her own life again. Indeed, for many of our participants, being in this transitional stage and dealing with demanding situations in daily life influenced them to see and reconstruct their lives differently. Louise explained that her loss had influenced her to see and do things differently. According to Louise, "that has probably been the biggest change, and it has been, kind of, in response to some of these things that were going on, to try and find if there was another way of managing situations."

*Figure 2: Amanda's Blown Glass*

The item of blown glass seen in Figure 2 brought back to Amanda the memories of her late husband. When they had been travelling together in Scotland, they went to Caithness, which is well known for its glass production, and they watched glassblowers make all sorts of objects. The death of her husband was a life-changing experience for Amanda. Her husband went to work one day and had a heart attack at work and died; he did not come home. "You really cannot get more sudden than that and I had to deal with it; there was no choice." Like Louise, Amanda explained how her loss influenced her to think about who she was, what she wanted out of her life, what she wanted to do, and how to answer tough questions. In her words, "It's a quite a big thing you know just to realise what you want out of your life and what you want to do and how that's going to affect other people and stuff like that."

Amanda and Louise used leisure travel to symbolically take them out of their liminal space of loss. The search for an unfamiliar environment of being away from home for self-reflection was

also reinforced by them not keeping in contact with home whilst they were travelling internationally. Indeed, previous scholars have questioned the extent to which people can hold experiencing liminality during travel when they maintain contact with home (Matthews, 2014; Sørensen, 2003; White & White, 2007). Another participant, Kathryn, explained that, in relation to family at home, “they weren’t sort of playing on my mind at all, so my mind was sort of completely open.” Victoria also suggested, “you do not worry about work or anything. I do leave that behind. Just let go of everything and enjoy the experience while it’s there.” This freedom was also a result of the fact all the participants in our study were retired and had completed their parental duties. The loss of their loved one(s) disconnected their relationship with their home to some extent.

*Figure 3: Kathryn’s Gloves*

Solo international travel took on a significant role in Kathryn’s life as a way to make the transition from the death of her husband. She realised, “well, there were things that were in my life before that aren’t here anymore, so, I’ve got a lot more freedom to do things.” According to Kathryn, during leisure travel, she was more relaxed and had time to reflect on issues that were central to her spiritual development after the death of her husband. The gloves shown in Figure 3 reminded Kathryn of a meaningful experience during her travels when she had lost her gloves and she realised that she needed gloves, because it was quite cold at times. She recounted a story of a young couple whose company she had enjoyed and had been connected to the gloves. Kathryn told the couple she had lost her gloves and the woman said she had seen similar ones on the side of the road. “I described them, and she said, yes, that is what I saw. And she told me where they were, and I said, that is exactly where I was sitting. So, I knew that I really had lost them, and that is where they were.” In Kathryn’s words, “The gloves are more than just gloves.” The relationships with people that she had while travelling were quite astonishing to her. Kathryn

thought that when people's minds become uncluttered, they can be much more present to one another and, therefore, have a sort of a deeper sense of sharing: "You can talk to anybody you meet and they're very open to listening to what you say." This appeared to help her reconsider new ways of being in her life after experiencing the death of her husband.

From the participants' narratives presented in this theme, there is evidence that the participants' sense of loss of their loved one(s) had created a lack of uncertainty about what to expect next in their life, and that travelling took the participants outside of their everyday environment, opening up a new space to escape and internally reflect.

### *Creating new perspectives*

In the second emergent theme, 'creating new perspectives', participants' quotes illuminated international travel as a favourable context for creating new perspectives of self, others, past, and the world around them; a chance to think and reorganise their life. Knowing oneself has been found to be a particular need for senior citizens in the context of loss (Kearl, 1980). Participants expressed that it was important to them to connect with others. The people they made connections with during their travels reportedly provided them with a sense of meaningful support in the context of their loss. Participants believed that, when travelling, people are often more willing to connect, happy to help, and available to others than they are in their daily life. Some of the participants reported that they experienced more important social interaction during travel than they did at home. The time spent with others allowed participants to gain new perspectives about other people and, importantly, it made them understand themselves better. According to Kathryn, "I learnt a lot about myself." Amanda mentioned the type of connections she had with people. For example, she spoke of "just that connection we got with those people, they do not question what you do, and they just accept you for who you are and what you are, so that is very, very special."

Travelling enabled the participants to compare themselves, consciously or unconsciously, to the people that they met, and that made them know themselves better.

*Figure 4: Matthew's Diary*

A diary (Figure 4) reminded Matthew of his wife who had passed away. Wherever they travelled together, she kept notes in her diary of what they did and where they went. His wife was sick for some time before she died, so they walked that journey together, and they had many conversations. Matthew's wife talked to him about "what his life would be like afterwards." His wife had turned 70 years of age in the January, and she died in the June. She had relayed to Matthew: "Look, I have had a wonderful marriage, wonderful life and I have turned 70. We are only promised three scores and ten, what more do I want." It was not easy for Matthew to cope with his wife's death, as Matthew clearly stated, "it was not easy for me, you know, after 50 years of marriage." Matthew said that, in light of his aging, being retired and experiencing the death of his wife, his international travel experiences broadened his mind, and kept him "fresh". Matthew explained that he believed it was good to meet other people during his solo travels, who have given meaning to his later life.

New perspectives were also created during participants' accounts of their leisure travel through associations made in visiting places significant to the past. Some participants explained that, despite all the negatives associated with their loss, being able to travel to see physical structures that were built many years ago made them feel that there was still an opportunity to be part of something amazing and it provided new perspectives about the past, but also the ability to connect to their place within history as well as have a vision for the future. For example, Amanda, travelled to the United Kingdom where her ancestors came from, and being there gave her a connection to them. Amanda relayed a life-changing experience in York Minster about her visit to the cathedral and learning of its vast history:

And there was a big pillar, and just at hand height, there was a big dent in the pillar, and that had worn away some of the hand size, a dent in the palm, and that was really life-changing for me. Because I felt insignificant, I felt like I was such a very, very small part of this incredible number of people that had been to that place over centuries and had left the mark.

This experience made Amanda aware that she too is part of the historical continuum; she is connected to the past, present, and into the future. Similarly, Kathryn got a new perspective on her issues from travelling within Europe where the civilisations go back thousands of years. Louise indicated that the opportunity to go to Europe and to be in places where people had lived for hundreds of years was also incredibly significant to her. These examples illustrate that the new perspective about past connection is important, as it enabled the participants to have a vision and connection to the future and the past (McIntosh & Prentice, 1999). Corbin and Strauss (1987) have suggested that revising or reconstructing life histories is important as a way to create biographical continuity after a major life event.

### *Engaging in acceptance*

The third emergent theme, 'engaging in acceptance', became evident as our participants explained that leisure travel helped them to accept their life after the loss. Leisure travel helped participants to feel secure enough to be able to manage their new situation in the future. Many participants stated that, whether they were travelling solo or accompanied, travelling confronted them with a physical challenge, and with the need to make decisions independently and to take the initiative. Travel also offered them the confidence to overcome their psychological uncertainties about their physical capabilities. These travel experiences made some participants realise that, despite their loss, they considered themselves lucky. As a result of loss, many participants found that meaning had drained from their world. They were unable to create new meanings in their mundane, familiar setting in order to adjust to a new life. This theme shows that travel had the ability to impute meaning and purpose into participants' lives, which aided their struggle to move ahead in their

life after the death of their loved one(s); a finding echoed in bereavement studies (Molzahn et al., 2012).

The loss of a loved one(s) is known to bring a life crisis to the bereaved person and challenges their assumptions about their existence. The participants' described how their familiar home environment, in particular, had posed a challenge for them to create new meanings, and international travel provided the time and space to reflect and engage in acceptance of their situation without disruptions. Challenges included how to reconstruct their life and everyday routines with constant reminders of the missing loved one(s). Significantly, leisure travel could symbolically provide a new 'fresh' context without reminders of the loss and helped to shape acceptance and new meanings and purpose for participants' lives.

*Figure 5: Mark's flower*

The death of Mark's parents made him realise the fragility of life. The flower (Figure 5) reminded Mark of the natural world that he saw on his leisure travels. When in Alaska, Mark learned quite a bit about the country and its culture through the plants and animals. Travelling to various natural places and seeing how other people lived made Mark realise that life is not about making huge amounts of money, but about being able to live content within yourself and what you think is right. Leisure travel appeared to help him overcome his psychological hesitation about his capabilities, accept those capabilities and redefine himself again as a "capable" person by overcoming challenges during travel. Kathryn similarly explained that she had learned during her travels that if she continues to do something that is manageable, that she can achieve something. Despite their loss, travel also helped many participants to consider themselves "fortunate". For example, when travelling, just seeing how other people lived in some places made Amanda thankful as she realised that some people do not have similar opportunities to live the way they wish, or in ways that were like her life.

### *Figure 6: Matthew's Medal*

According to Matthew, looking at this medal (see Figure 6) triggered memories of his leisure travel to Singapore following the death of his wife. In Singapore, Matthew recounted seeing people of his age sweeping the streets. When he talked to them, he described them as “happy, they are working, and they are useful.” That experience stuck in his mind: “if they can at that age, 70- and 80-year-olds, be out doing menial tasks, there is no reason why we should be sitting on our backsides at that age doing nothing.” While travelling in busy urban cities, Kathryn realized that “life is also exciting because it brings changes, it brings challenges, and that is part of living.” For many participants, therefore, it was clear that observing other lives around them in the places they visited gave them a sense of acceptance, rendered them able to ascribe new meaning and purpose to their lives, and facilitated their efforts to move forward following their loss.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This phenomenological study explored how international leisure travel shapes the lived understandings and reconstructed self for those living in the senior phase of life after the loss of a loved one(s). As the world's population is ageing, gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of the senior life stage is vital for both researchers and practitioners. Senior citizens experience a higher risk of experiencing the loss of loved one(s) (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007), and it influences them to seek a higher understanding of the meaning of life than those in other age groups do (Barnes et al., 1996). Later life is the stage of assessing and evaluating how they have spent their lives and preparing for the end of life (Balk, 1999; Matthews & Marwit, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). This stage is characterised by the gains issuing from their maturity and life experience, and the consciousness of their mortality (Moal-Ulvoas, 2016). Our study sought to gain new insights into the role that international leisure travel may play within this meaning-making and transition process, notably following the death of a loved one(s). Indeed, our findings

provided evidence to suggest that our participants had become aware of their ageing and bounded by the time remaining to live; the loss of their loved one(s) made them conscious of their mortality, making them more profoundly reflective of themselves and seeking to make meaningful changes in their life; leisure travel played an important role in this regard.

Our study contributed an understanding of how international leisure travel is experienced within a sense of liminality and can create new perspectives and engender feelings of acceptance for an individual living with loss. We therefore confirmed Turner's (1997) theory of liminality as useful for examining these lived experiences. Our study findings provided evidence of the broader positive reflection that reshaped senior travellers' lives following the loss of their loved one(s). Researchers, particularly within leisure studies, have often interpreted loss, such as the death of a loved one(s), as having a negative impact on leisure travel participation (e.g. Fox & McDermott, 2021). What was significant in our study, however, was that leisure travel appeared to offer a vehicle for coping, reflecting, accepting and reconstructing self. From this perspective, leisure travel appears important for these senior individuals after the loss of a loved one(s) as it offers a means of escape from their everyday life and environment, as well as allowing the individual the time and space to make a social, material, and existential transition. For example, some participants in our study explained that, had they not had their loss, they would have been different people, but not necessarily better ones. These insights provide new theoretical understandings of how loss, through death of a loved one(s), can render a liminal space to significantly and positively impact not only leisure travel participation but, through leisure travel, can positively reshape one's life.

Existential questions, such as "Why is this happening to me?" "What should I do about it?" "Why things are the way they are", asked by our participants following their loss, meant that they had become stuck in a space of liminality following the death of their loved one(s). These questions

were the catalyst for change in their lives, with international leisure travel becoming one of their key priorities. Existential questions are known to be part of the liminal space created by the experience of loss and grief (Bruce et al., 2014; Frommer, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Little et al., 1998). Initially, travel removed participants from their home environment where the loss had taken place; it posed a symbolic element of change in “going away”. It took them outside the normal and beyond the routine, and it supported participants to see and do things differently. White and White (2004) have also argued that travel serves as a way to acquire distance from the old way of life to transition to a new way of life, although investigations about how this is experienced in the context of the death of a loved one(s) requires further evaluation.

The study findings also highlighted that participants, in their senior years and following the death of a loved one(s), realised that they have limited time and space in which to live, and this knowledge encouraged them to consider what is most important in life, including the importance of participation in international travel. Gerontology literature confirms that people in the latter stage of life face the loss of loved one(s) and that loss reshapes their priorities in life (Fry, 2001; Gee, 1999). In theology, previous researchers have explored how religion and spirituality guide people to seek meaningful changes in their life after facing a loss (Pargament et al., 2005), and the meaning-making potential of leisure for seniors has also been echoed in some previous studies (Alén et al., 2012; Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Figueiredo et al., 2012). However, the extant leisure literature remains scant in understanding the meaningful and seemingly significant nexus between loss and death, leisure travel, and existential transition within the senior phase of life.

After facing the death of a loved one(s), participants were more reflective on their own meaning and purpose in life, and cared less about achieving physical goals and acquiring material goods. Travelling provided the opportunity to understand other people, explore the wider environment and its history, and appreciate humanity. For example, participants questioned their consumption

and connection to material goods. They reflected on whether they needed them and if they served a deeper purpose in their lives. Travel facilitated this questioning of the meaning of things that had once been important, and it provided participants with the space away from their home environment to reflect and move to acceptance. Studies of volunteer tourism similarly have provided examples where volunteers experience an opportunity for understanding the self and personal transformation (Bailey & Russell, 2012; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007), although the extent to which this altruism is connected to any personal loss is not known.

The findings of our phenomenological study, whilst providing rich subjective narratives relating to the intersection of death, loss and leisure travel, require further exploration and validation. Future research could move beyond the Western context of our study. Each culture and religion shapes unique ways of how individuals may react to death based on shared beliefs, values, and expectations. In crisis situations, individuals are likely to go back to their cultural systems (Kagawa-Singer, 1998). Therefore, on the basis of their diverse cultural identities and beliefs, individuals may respond to the death and loss of a loved one(s) differently, and, thus, the meanings they obtain through leisure travel may also differ. Overall, this study has established that leisure travel can play a significant role in enabling senior travellers to make the transition from a loss to new ways of life. Future research could extend our research into a comparison with different age cohorts of leisure travellers. To conclude, we hope this study draws interest from future researchers to further explore the diverse cultural, spiritual, social, personal and symbolic ways in which leisure can become a space for meaning-making and the transformation of one's life following the death of a loved one(s).

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