



Parental Loss During COVID-19: A Qualitative Study of Retrospective Childhood Bereavement Experiences Among Filipino Adults in Metro Manila

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic dismantled the ritual infrastructure of mourning across the Philippines, forcing bereaved families to confront loss without the communal practices that Filipino culture has long depended on for psychological and spiritual healing. This study examines the retrospective experiences of twelve Filipino adults in Metro Manila who suffered parental loss to COVID-19 during their childhood years and were prevented from participating in traditional funeral rites owing to mandatory cremation protocols issued by the Department of Health. Participants ranged in current age from 22 to 29 and had been between 9 and 16 years old at the time of bereavement. Using Consensual Qualitative Research methodology, semi-structured virtual interviews were analyzed to produce five experiential domains: disrupted grief progression following ritual deprivation, loss of culturally embedded mourning practices, psychological and social consequences of ritual absence, distortion of grief timelines, and adaptive coping rooted in cultural resilience. Findings reveal that the forced elimination of lamay, pasiyam, and pakikiramay did not merely inconvenience participants but fundamentally altered the character of their grief, contributing to prolonged ambiguity, heightened guilt, and lasting spiritual unease. Participants nonetheless demonstrated meaningful creative adaptation, generating personal and family-based ritual alternatives that preserved cultural continuity under restrictive conditions. This study contributes empirically grounded knowledge about pandemic bereavement in a collectivist Filipino setting and offers practical guidance for culturally responsive grief support, educational institutions, and community mental health services.

Keywords *COVID-19 Bereavement, Childhood Parental Loss, Filipino Mourning Practices, Retrospective Qualitative Study, Pandemic Grief, Lamay, Pakikiramay*

INTRODUCTION

Bereavement following the death of a parent is among the most formative experiences a person can undergo during childhood. When that loss occurs under conditions that foreclose normal mourning—where no vigil is held, nobody is seen, no community gathers—the psychological work of grief is deprived of its usual cultural scaffolding. The COVID-19 pandemic created precisely these conditions on a massive scale. In the Philippines, where communal mourning traditions are woven deeply into Catholic and animistic cultural identity, the consequences of this deprivation were especially severe.

The Philippine government's emergency protocols, enacted in response to the rapidly spreading virus, required that bodies of confirmed COVID-19 victims be cremated within 32 hours of death. This single mandate eliminated an entire ecosystem of mourning practices. The lamay—a multi-day wake held in the family home where community members gather continuously to pray,

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share food, and tell stories about the deceased—could not take place. The *pasiyam*, a nine-day cycle of communal prayer observances, was suspended. The culture of *pakikiramay*, in which extended networks of relatives, neighbors, and community members offer sustained practical and emotional support to the bereaved, was rendered impossible by quarantine restrictions. Families were left to grieve in isolation, without the verification of farewell, without the comfort of community presence, and without the ritual structures that ordinarily mark the boundary between life and death.

Children caught in this situation faced compounded difficulty. Developmentally, children rely on concrete, embodied experiences and socially modeled behavior to understand abstract realities such as death, spiritual transition, and cultural obligation. The absence of ritual participation meant that bereaved Filipino children during the pandemic lost not only a parent but also the structured cultural pathway through which Filipino families process, acknowledge, and begin to accept loss. These circumstances raise important questions about the long-term psychological and cultural effects of pandemic bereavement—questions that can be partially illuminated by listening to those who lived through that experience as children and are now able to reflect on it as adults.

This study investigates the retrospective accounts of twelve Filipino adults, now aged 22 to 29, who lost a parent to COVID-19 when they were between 9 and 16 years old and were unable to participate in traditional funeral rituals due to mandatory health protocols. Using a Consensual Qualitative Research methodology, the study explores how the forced absence of culturally significant mourning practices shaped their bereavement adjustment and the adaptive strategies they and their families developed in response. The study does not evaluate formal intervention programs, nor does it observe children directly. Its contribution lies in documenting the lived meaning of pandemic childhood bereavement as retrospectively understood and narrated by those who experienced it.

The research addresses a significant gap in the literature. Pandemic bereavement scholarship has grown rapidly since 2020, but studies examining collectivist, Catholic-majority cultural contexts—particularly those involving retrospective adult accounts of childhood bereavement—remain scarce. This study contributes empirically grounded insight into a deeply underexplored intersection: childhood grief, Filipino cultural identity, and the disruptions wrought by public health emergencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks anchored the design of this study and guided its interpretive approach. [Worden's \(2018\)](#) Task Model of Mourning conceptualizes grief as an active process that requires completing four tasks: accepting the reality of the loss, processing the pain of grief, adapting to a changed world without the deceased, and finding an enduring bond with the deceased while re-engaging with life. This framework was selected because it accommodates cultural variation in how grief work is accomplished and recognizes that external conditions—including the presence or absence of ritual—shape whether each task can be completed. Ritual provides structure for the first task, offering concrete, communal confirmation of death that initiates the process of psychological acceptance.

[Boss's \(2022\)](#) theory of ambiguous loss provided the second lens. Ambiguous loss describes experiences that resist psychological resolution because they lack the clarity and finality that normal mourning provides. In the context of this study, the sudden death of a parent—unwitnessed, unremarked by ritual, and processed in isolation—created conditions closely analogous to ambiguous loss. Participants could not see the body, could not participate in communal verification, and could not enact the spiritual preparations they were culturally conditioned to regard as obligatory. These conditions sustained a form of psychological incompleteness that extended well

beyond the acute grief period. Together, the two frameworks informed the interview protocol, guided initial domain identification during analysis, and structured the interpretation of how ritual deprivation disrupted and complicated grief.

Bereavement, Ritual, and Pandemic Disruption

The role of funeral rituals in supporting healthy bereavement has been well documented across grief research. Rituals provide structured frameworks for emotional expression, create socially recognized occasions for communal mourning support, and generate concrete symbolic markers of the transition from life to death—all of which facilitate the first tasks of grief (Neimeyer, 2001). Mitima-Verloop and colleagues (2022) found that bereaved individuals who experienced pandemic-related funeral restrictions reported significantly higher levels of prolonged grief symptoms and were less able to experience the funeral as meaningful or comforting. These findings carry weight given that positive funeral evaluation is consistently linked to healthier bereavement trajectories.

For children, ritual participation carries additional developmental significance. Children rely on concrete, embodied, and socially modeled experiences to form an understanding of abstract concepts (Piaget, 2019). Santos and colleagues (2023) documented through ethnographic research that Filipino children specifically depended on participation in lamay and pasiyam for the transmission of cultural knowledge and the gradual internalization of death-related concepts—processes that were abruptly foreclosed by pandemic protocols. This finding suggests that for Filipino children, ritual deprivation was not merely an emotional loss but also a cognitive and cultural one.

Filipino Mourning Traditions and Pandemic Impact

Filipino mourning practices represent a distinctive synthesis of pre-colonial animistic beliefs and Spanish Catholic influences that have evolved over centuries. The lamay, or wake, typically lasts several days, with the coffin displayed in the family home and surrounded by a continuous community presence. Community members exchange stories about the deceased, pray in rotating shifts, and provide practical support to the bereaved family. The pasiyam involves nine days of communal prayer following burial, and annual observances—particularly on the first death anniversary—continue to structure community support over time. Underlying all these practices is the concept of pakikiramay: a collective outpouring of sympathy, physical presence, and shared mourning that draws the bereaved into community rather than leaving them to grieve in isolation (Enriquez, 2019).

Bernales and Cruz (2022) provided early documentation of the impact of pandemic cremation protocols on Filipino families, identifying cultural identity confusion, ambiguous loss, and the collapse of community support structures as prominent themes. Their work established that mandatory cremation conflicted directly with Filipino cultural values related to bodily preservation, extended communal witnessing, and the belief—rooted in animistic tradition—that proper preparation of the body supports the soul's transition to the afterlife. Cabañero and Namoco (2025) subsequently examined digital mourning adaptations, finding that while social media and video platforms enabled partial continuation of memorial practices, they could not replicate the embodied, sensory dimensions of physical community gathering.

Childhood Bereavement and Long-Term Effects

Children bereaved of a parent face developmental risks extending beyond acute grief. Rossi and colleagues (2021) tracked childhood COVID-19 bereavement longitudinally, finding that children unable to attend funeral rites showed persistent intrusive thoughts, avoidance behaviors,

and difficulty accepting loss reality at twelve-month follow-up. Educational institutions have registered related effects: pandemic-bereaved children demonstrated sustained increases in attention difficulties, academic decline, and social withdrawal (Mangahas, 2023). These findings establish the significance of understanding childhood pandemic bereavement not only in its acute form but across the developmental trajectory—which is precisely what retrospective adult accounts, such as those gathered in this study, enable.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), a systematic qualitative methodology developed by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) and elaborated by Hill and colleagues (2005). CQR combines in-depth inquiry through semi-structured interviews with a structured, team-based consensus process designed to strengthen the trustworthiness of findings. The method is well-suited to investigating complex psychological and experiential phenomena because it captures subjective meaning while maintaining analytical rigor through multiple researchers' perspectives and iterative consensus procedures. CQR was selected because the study sought to understand how participants made sense of their childhood bereavement experiences in retrospect. This goal requires careful attention to individual meaning-making rather than quantification of outcomes.

Researcher Reflexivity

Consistent with CQR protocol (Hill et al., 2005), the research team engaged in structured reflexivity before data collection commenced. Each team member documented personal associations with loss, COVID-19, Filipino cultural practices, and childhood bereavement, and these reflections were revisited at intervals throughout the analytical process. This approach helped identify and manage interpretive biases that might otherwise lead to the unreflective projection of researchers' assumptions onto participants' accounts. The lead researcher had personal familiarity with bereavement within a Filipino family context, which provided cultural fluency but required ongoing vigilance to maintain appropriate analytical distance from individual participant narratives.

Participants

Twelve adult participants were recruited through purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals through grief support groups, healthcare facilities, and community mental health networks in Metro Manila. Inclusion criteria were: (1) current age of 18 or older; (2) loss of a parent to COVID-19 between March 2020 and December 2021; (3) age at the time of parental loss between 9 and 16 years; (4) inability to participate in traditional funeral rites due to mandatory DOH cremation protocols; (5) Metro Manila residence at the time of loss. Participants who had received formal grief counseling within the previous six months were excluded to minimize the risk of confounding retrospective accounts with therapeutic reframing. A sample of 12 is consistent with CQR recommendations for achieving saturation in in-depth qualitative inquiry (Hill et al., 2005). Table 1 provides a full demographic summary.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 12)

Code	Age Now	Age at Loss	Parent Lost	Yrs Since	Religion	District
P1	24	11	Father	3	Roman Catholic	Quezon City
P2	27	14	Mother	3	Roman Catholic	Manila

Code	Age Now	Age at Loss	Parent Lost	Yrs Since	Religion	District
P3	25	12	Father	3	Born-Again Christian	Caloocan
P4	23	10	Mother	3	Roman Catholic	Pasig
P5	26	13	Father	3	Roman Catholic	Marikina
P6	28	15	Father	3	Iglesia ni Cristo	Valenzuela
P7	22	9	Mother	3	Roman Catholic	Taguig
P8	29	16	Father	3	Roman Catholic	Paranaque
P9	24	11	Mother	3	Born-Again Christian	Las Pinas
P10	25	12	Father	3	Roman Catholic	Makati
P11	23	10	Mother	3	Roman Catholic	Mandaluyong
P12	26	13	Father	3	Roman Catholic	Muntinlupa

Note. All participants identified as Filipino nationals residing in Metro Manila at the time of parental loss. Years since loss = approximate, based on interview date.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom videoconferencing between January and April 2024. An interview protocol was developed from established grief literature ([Worden, 2018](#); [Neimeyer, 2001](#)) and pilot-tested with two bereaved adults who met inclusion criteria but were not included in the final sample. Pilot testing led to revision of three questions identified as ambiguous and clarification of the study's retrospective focus in the consent materials. Core interview domains covered: (a) the participant's recollection of their parent's illness and death; (b) memories of the funeral restrictions and what they were and were not permitted to do; (c) how they understood and processed the loss at the time; (d) the role of cultural and religious practices in their grief; (e) coping strategies developed individually and with their family; and (f) their current understanding of how those experiences have shaped them. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded with written participant consent, and was transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed against recordings for accuracy before analysis. Following each interview, participants received written debriefing materials and contact information for a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in grief counseling.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board prior to recruitment. All participants provided written informed consent that explicitly addressed the retrospective and emotionally sensitive nature of the study, including the right to decline any question or withdraw without consequence. All identifying information was removed and replaced with coded identifiers (P1 through P12). Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the three-stage CQR process outlined by [Hill and colleagues \(2005\)](#). In the domain coding phase, two researchers independently reviewed each transcript to identify broad thematic areas that captured essential aspects of participants' experiences; disagreements were resolved through structured discussion until consensus was reached. During core ideas development, researchers collaboratively condensed participant responses into concise summaries that preserved the essential meaning without interpretive elaboration. The cross-analysis phase

involved examining core ideas across all participants to identify patterns within each domain, with categories classified by frequency: general (all 12 participants), typical (7 to 11), variant (3 to 6), and rare (1 to 2). An external auditor with extensive CQR experience reviewed the full analytical process, including raw transcripts, coding decisions, and cross-analysis categories, and provided feedback that was incorporated through team discussion. A comprehensive audit trail of meeting minutes, iterative drafts, and auditor correspondence was maintained throughout.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

CQR analysis of the twelve interviews yielded five major domains: disrupted grief progression following ritual deprivation; loss of culturally embedded mourning practices; psychological, social, and spiritual consequences of ritual absence; distortion of grief timelines; and adaptive coping and cultural resilience. Each domain is presented below with illustrative participant quotations, followed by integration with relevant literature.

Domain 1: Disrupted Grief Progression Following Ritual Deprivation

Emotional Adjustments

All twelve participants described retrospectively recognizing that their grief following parental loss had felt arrested or suspended—unable to progress in the way they later came to understand grief typically moves. The absence of concrete communal acknowledgment left many in a prolonged state of disbelief. P7, who was nine years old when her mother died, recalled:

“Sa loob ng maraming linggo pagkatapos, paulit-ulit kong naiisip na baka may pagkakamali. Walang katawan, walang kabaong, walang pumunta sa bahay. Hindi ko talaga naniniwalang wala na siya hanggang matagal na ang lumipas — marahil ilang buwan. Ang bahay ay pakiramdam ko na para bang lumakad lang siya kung saan.”

English Translation:

“For weeks after, I kept thinking maybe there had been a mistake. There was no body, no coffin, no one coming to the house. I did not fully believe she was gone until much later, maybe months. The house just felt like she had gone somewhere.” – P7.

This experience reflects [Boss's \(2022\)](#) concept of ambiguous loss. Without the physical and social verification that funeral rites normally provide, the psychological reality of the death remained incomplete. Eight participants described what might be termed ritual suspension—an enduring sense that grief had been interrupted before it could properly begin. This finding extends [Mitima-Verloop and colleagues' \(2022\)](#) finding that funeral restriction is associated with prolonged grief symptoms, situating it specifically within a Filipino childhood context.

Nine participants described intensified guilt that was closely tied to Filipino cultural values. P4, who lost her mother when she was ten, articulated the experience:

“Alam ko na gusto ng aking ina ang tamang mga dasal, ang mga tao, at ang siyam na araw. Wala kaming nagawa sa lahat ng ito. Naramdaman kong nabigo ko siya. Sa ating kultura, iyon ang paraan ng pagpapakita ng pagmamahal at paggalang. Kung wala iyon, pakiramdam ko ay pinabayaan ko siya.”

English Translation:

“I knew my mother would have wanted the proper prayers, the people, the nine days.

We could not do any of it. I felt like I had failed her. In our culture, those things are how you show love and respect. Without them, it felt like I had let her down.” – P4.

This guilt is rooted in the concept of utang na loob—the deep sense of reciprocal obligation that children owe parents, which in Filipino culture is partly discharged through proper burial and mourning observances. The inability to fulfill this obligation created not merely sadness but a specifically cultural form of moral distress. Seven participants also reported heightened anxiety about their parents’ spiritual welfare, rooted in concern that without the prayers and ritual preparations traditionally performed before and during burial, the soul might not have been adequately supported in its transition.

Behavioral Adjustments

All twelve participants spontaneously developed substitute rituals in the absence of formal ceremony. These included home altars, framed photographs placed in prominent positions, prayers led by grandparents, preparation of the deceased’s favorite foods on commemorative dates, and letter-writing to the parent. P10 described how his family organized an alternative structure:

“Nag-ilaw kami ng kandila tuwing gabi sa loob ng siyam na araw. Pinamunuan kami ng aking lola sa pagdarasal ng rosaryo. Hindi ito katulad ng magkakaroon ng lahat sa paligid namin, ngunit nagbigay ito sa amin ng isang bagay na maaasahan — isang hugis sa aming kalungkutan.”

English Translation:

“We lit candles every night for nine days. My grandmother led us in the rosary. It was not the same as having everyone around, but it gave us something to hold onto, a shape to the grief.” – P10.

This universal impulse toward ritual creation reflects findings in pandemic bereavement research that bereaved individuals resourcefully construct alternative mourning frameworks when institutional ritual is unavailable ([Mitima-Verloop et al., 2022](#)). Five participants reported social withdrawal during the acute grief period, which several attributed directly to the loss of pakikiramay networks that ordinarily draw bereaved families into the community rather than allowing them to isolate.

Cognitive Adjustments

Nine participants described lasting difficulty constructing meaning around their parents’ death, which they connected specifically to the absence of the communal storytelling that Lamay would normally generate. Filipino wake culture involves extended, informal narration of who the deceased was—creating a shared community account of the person’s life and meaning. Without this, participants found themselves assembling meaning in isolation. Six participants described challenges in redefining their family roles and cultural identity without the structured mourning periods—pasiyam and the forty-day observance—that ordinarily scaffold this transition.

Domain 2: Loss of Culturally Embedded Mourning Practices

All twelve participants identified the elimination of lamay as the single most significant ritual loss. P2, who lost his father at fourteen, articulated what the wake’s absence meant:

“Darating sana ang mga tao mula sa lahat ng dako — mga tita, pinsan, kapitbahay, mga tao mula sa simbahan. Ganoon talaga ang nangyayari. Magkakasama kayong uupo, kakain, at mag-uusap tungkol sa yumaong tao. Ang kanyang kamatayan, pakiramdam ko, ay hindi nakita ng sinuman dahil wala ito. Para bang basta na lang siyang nawala.”

English Translation:

“People would have come from everywhere—aunts, cousins, neighbors, people from church. That is how it is. You sit together, you eat together, you talk about the person who died. His death felt invisible because none of that happened. It was like he just disappeared.” – P2

Ten participants specifically mourned the loss of huling gabi—the final night gathering—which occupies a particular emotional weight in Filipino mourning culture as the culminating communal farewell before burial. The 32-hour cremation mandate made this impossible in all twelve cases. The psychological consequence was not merely sadness at missing an occasion but a felt rupture in the relationship between the living and the dead—a sense that the transition was incomplete.

All participants reported spiritual anxiety arising from the impossibility of conducting final prayers and religious blessings before cremation. Four participants described this anxiety extending into something resembling a faith crisis. P6, whose religious denomination prescribes specific burial rites, reflected:

“Sa aming pananampalataya, may mga bagay na kailangang gawin para sa kaluluwa. Hindi namin ito nagawa. Matagal akong nag-alala kung maayos ang kaluluwa ng aking ama, kung naiintindihan ng Diyos kung bakit hindi namin nasunod ang tamang paraan.”

English Translation:

“In our faith, there are things that have to be done for the soul. We could not do them. I worried for a long time whether my father’s soul was alright, whether God understood why we could not follow the proper way.” – P6.

The elimination of pasiyam—nine days of communal prayer that provide structured psychological and social support during the transition from acute grief—was reported by all twelve participants as a significant deprivation. The ritual creates a communal container for grief, providing daily structure and regularized social contact during the period when bereaved families are most vulnerable. Its absence left participants without the social rhythm that ordinarily accompanies early bereavement.

Domain 3: Psychological, Social, and Spiritual Consequences

All twelve participants described grief experiences that they characterized as stuck or unable to move forward. It is important to emphasize that this study did not conduct clinical assessments; references to complicated or prolonged grief reflect participant-reported subjective experiences rather than clinical diagnoses. P1, who lost his father at eleven, described the experience plainly:

“Ang normal na pagdadalamhati, sa palagay ko, ay gumagalaw dahil may mga bagay na gagawin, may mga tao sa paligid mo—isang uri ng ritmo. Wala akong ganoon. May bigat lang na dumating sa akin sa loob ng maraming taon at hindi ko alam kung ano ang gagawin ko rito.”

English Translation:

“Normal grief, I think, moves because there are things to do, people around you, a kind of rhythm. I did not have that. There was just this weight that sat on me for years, and I did not know what to do with it.” – P1.

The loss of pakikiramay networks was identified by all participants as a significant social consequence. Cross-cultural bereavement research confirms that sociocultural identity and community belonging critically shape grief expression (Kokou-Kpolou et al., 2022). In the Filipino context, pakikiramay is not merely a social gesture but a structured cultural institution that provides practical support, emotional validation, and a shared presence of mourning at the time of greatest vulnerability. Five participants described lasting disruption to their sense of cultural identity, reporting that their inability to fulfill traditional obligations left them feeling disconnected from Filipino heritage in ways that persisted beyond the immediate bereavement period.

Spiritual consequences were widespread. P9, who lost her mother at eleven, described persistent uncertainty about prayer:

“Nagdasal ako tuwing gabi, ngunit hindi ako sigurado kung naaabot siya ng mga dasal ko. Hindi namin naisagawa ang tamang mga ritwal. Matagal akong nag-alala kung ang kanyang kaluluwa ay nasa kapayapaan. Ang pag-iisip na iyon ay hindi ako iniwan sa loob ng maraming taon.”

English Translation:

“I prayed every night, but I was not sure the prayers were reaching her. We had not done the proper rituals. I worried for a very long time whether her soul was at peace. That thought did not leave me for years.” – P9.

Domain 4: Distortion of Grief Timelines

Extended denial phases were reported by all twelve participants, with several noting that full psychological acceptance of their parents' death did not occur until substantially later than they believed was typical. Without physical viewing, without communal witnessing, and without the structured ritual passage from pre-burial to post-burial states, the psychological recognition of death's finality was delayed. Eight participants described intensified anger during their grief—diffuse anger directed at pandemic circumstances, government policies, and, in some cases, a sense of cosmic injustice. P8 reflected:

“MaTagal akong nagalit. Hindi lang tungkol sa pagkawala ng aking ama kundi sa lahat ng bagay na kinuha pa rin sa ibabaw noon. Ang galit ay mas mahirap dahil wala itong mapupuntahan. Walang mananagot sa kawalan ng mga ritwal.”

English Translation:

“I was angry for a very long time. Not just about losing my father but about everything that was stripped away on top of that. The anger was harder because there was nowhere to put it. There was no one to hold responsible for the absence of the rituals.”

– P8.

Processing grief pain was complicated for ten participants by the absence of co-regulation—the shared, socially supported emotional processing that communal mourning provides. This is developmentally significant: children’s emotional regulation is still maturing and is heavily dependent on regulation by trusted adults and the community. The loss of communal mourning structures thus affected not only the content of grief but the child’s capacity to process it.

Domain 5: Adaptive Coping and Cultural Resilience

Despite the profound disruptions documented above, all twelve participants demonstrated active and often creative adaptation. These adaptations were not experienced as adequate substitutions for what was lost but were meaningful and, in several cases, generative of new forms of cultural practice that have persisted. P5 described how his family adapted the *pasiyam*:

“Ginawa namin ang aming sariling siyam na araw sa bahay, pamilya lang. Pinamunuan ng aking lola ang rosaryo tuwing gabi. Hindi ito ang pagtitipon ng komunidad na sana ay mayroon kami, ngunit pakiramdam namin ay ginagalang namin siya sa tanging paraan na kaya namin. Ginagawa ko pa rin ito hanggang ngayon tuwing anibersaryo ng kanyang kamatayan.”

English Translation:

“We did our own nine days at home, just the family. My grandmother led the rosary every night. It was not the community gathering we would have had, but it felt like we were honoring him in the only way we could. I still do it now on his death anniversary.” – P5.

Nine participants described family modifications to traditional rituals that brought available family members together via video calls or small in-person gatherings. Personal ritual creation was universal: home altars, daily prayers, memory books, and special commemorative meals appeared across all twelve accounts.

Cultural values functioned as active coping resources throughout. *Pakikipagkapwa*—the Filipino concept of shared personhood and community belonging—sustained participants’ sense of connection to the broader Filipino community even when physical isolation prevented them from enacting that belonging in traditional ways. *Bahala na*, a culturally grounded orientation toward acceptance of circumstances beyond one’s control, was described by eight participants as a source of psychological equanimity that prevented indefinite paralysis. Faith-based resilience, even among the four participants who experienced periods of religious doubt, ultimately reasserted itself as a coping resource for nine participants.

These findings extend Alcantara and colleagues’ (2023) documentation of cultural resilience resources during Filipino pandemic bereavement, demonstrating how those who experienced it as children continued to draw on and adapt cultural frameworks into adulthood. The creativity and persistence evident in participants’ coping strategies suggest that while ritual deprivation created genuine harm, it did not eliminate the cultural resources available to bereaved Filipino children.

Integrative Discussion

Taken together, these five domains reveal that childhood parental loss during COVID-19 in the Filipino context involved not only the grief of losing a parent but a compounding secondary

loss—the loss of the cultural infrastructure through which that grief would normally be processed. Participants did not simply grieve without ritual; they grieved knowing what the rituals were, understanding their significance, and experiencing their absence as deprivation.

From Worden's (2018) task perspective, ritual absence impeded the first task of accepting the reality of loss in ways that had downstream effects on all subsequent tasks. From Boss's (2022) ambiguous loss perspective, the lack of physical confirmation, communal verification, and spiritual preparation created conditions of enduring psychological ambiguity. The integration of both frameworks suggests that support models for bereaved children in comparable contexts should simultaneously attend to the cognitive-behavioral work of grief processing and the cultural and relational conditions in which that work is expected to take place.

CONCLUSIONS

This study documented the retrospective accounts of twelve Filipino adults who, as children, lost a parent to COVID-19 under conditions of mandatory ritual deprivation. The findings reveal that ritual absence was not experienced as a peripheral inconvenience but as a central disruption to psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of grief. Participants consistently described bereavement that was delayed, ambiguous, socially unsupported, and spiritually unresolved in ways directly attributable to the absence of *lamay*, *pasiyam*, and *pakikiramay*.

The study's empirical contribution lies in documenting these experiences from the retrospective vantage point of adulthood. Participants brought analytical clarity to childhood experiences that direct child participants would not have been able to articulate, while also testifying to the lasting effects of early bereavement deprivation on their psychological development and cultural identity. The study adds Filipino cultural specificity to a growing international literature on pandemic bereavement that has until recently been dominated by Western contexts.

Theoretically, the findings extend Worden's task framework and Boss's ambiguous loss theory into the domain of culturally embedded childhood bereavement, demonstrating that both frameworks must be understood in relation to the specific ritual and communal conditions in which grief tasks are culturally expected to be fulfilled. Practically, the findings carry implications for grief counseling services, school-based mental health programs, and community organizations working with bereaved children and families. Culturally responsive support should prioritize facilitating meaningful ritual alternatives, communal mourning networks, and family-based meaning-making, particularly under conditions—such as future public health emergencies—where traditional rituals are restricted.

The resilience documented here is not a reason for complacency. Participants' adaptive strategies were meaningful but were not adequate substitutes for the full apparatus of Filipino bereavement culture. Future crisis response frameworks should seek to protect access to culturally significant mourning practices to the greatest extent possible, recognizing these practices as central mechanisms of psychological healing rather than optional social conventions.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample of 12 participants, while appropriate for the CQR methodology, limits the transferability of the findings to other populations or settings. Second, all participants were from Metro Manila, a specific urban context that may not reflect the diversity of bereavement experiences across the Philippines' varied regional, economic, and cultural landscapes. Third, the study relied on retrospective self-report, meaning that childhood experiences were reconstructed from memory through the interpretive lens of adulthood; such accounts are subject to selective recall, reinterpretation, and temporal

compression.

Fourth, no child participants were directly included; conclusions about childhood grief are thus mediated through adult retrospection rather than direct child observation. Fifth, the study did not employ clinical assessment instruments, and characterizations of complicated or prolonged grief reflect subjective self-report rather than clinical determination. Sixth, limited information was available about participants' socioeconomic circumstances and extended family composition, both of which may have influenced access to coping resources.

Future research should directly include child participants, using age-appropriate qualitative methods such as narrative drawing or structured storytelling. Longitudinal designs tracking developmental outcomes over time would provide essential knowledge about long-term trajectories. Comparative studies examining bereavement experiences across Filipino regions, religious affiliations, and socioeconomic contexts would deepen understanding of how specific cultural features shape grief outcomes. Research evaluating the effectiveness of culturally adapted grief support programs—particularly those designed to facilitate meaningful ritual alternatives under restrictive conditions- is urgently needed to inform practice.

Artificial Intelligence Tool Use Declaration

The authors employed Grammarly, an AI-powered writing assistant, to enhance the manuscript's clarity, grammar, and overall readability, ensuring the language was precise, professional, and accessible to the intended audience. Additionally, Claude, an AI language model developed by Anthropic, was used as a supplementary tool to identify and locate relevant sources, references, and supporting literature, strengthening the article's scholarly foundation. Claude was also used to translate participants' direct quotations from English into Filipino (Tagalog), facilitating the bilingual presentation of participants' voices and enhancing cultural accessibility for Filipino-speaking readers. It is important to emphasize that all three tools were used strictly in an assistive capacity, serving to refine and support the authors' original work rather than to generate or fabricate content. The authors exercised critical judgment in reviewing, evaluating, and revising all AI-assisted outputs—including the translated quotations—to ensure factual accuracy, contextual appropriateness, linguistic fidelity, and academic integrity. Ultimately, the authors bear full and sole responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final published work.

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