

Grief and bereavement during college: Tensions associated with loss in university students from Lima during de COVID-19 pandemic

Duelo y luto durante la universidad: tensiones asociadas a la pérdida en estudiantes universitarios de Lima durante la pandemia de COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Grief and bereavement among young college students is a growing topic of interest in qualitative psychological research. This study focuses on the grief experiences of

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college students in the context of the pandemic. A qualitative study adhering to strict ethical guidelines was conducted with 8 students. Results show that sudden bereavement, especially due to COVID-19, represented a traumatic experience for college students; and, furthermore, it complicated their grief processes. These experiences of grief were lived in different ways: some students actively remember and honor their deceased loved ones, while others avoid confronting their grief, choosing instead to focus on academics. Support networks, including family, peers, and professors, play a critical role in helping students navigate their grief and adjust to the loss. Finally, results of this study provide recommendations for universities to implement policies that offer individual and collective support. These initiatives can help grieving students manage their emotions and academic responsibilities, ensuring their overall well-being.

KEYWORDS

Grief, bereavement, college students, COVID-19

RESUMEN

El duelo y el luto en los jóvenes universitarios es un tema de creciente interés en la investigación psicológica cualitativa. Se realizó un estudio cualitativo con 8 estudiantes, siguiendo estrictas directrices éticas. Los resultados muestran que el duelo repentino, especialmente debido al covid-19, representó una experiencia traumática para los estudiantes universitarios y, además, complicó sus procesos de duelo. Estas experiencias de duelo se vivieron de diversas maneras: algunos estudiantes recuerdan y honran activamente a sus seres queridos fallecidos, mientras que otros evitan afrontar su duelo y optan en su lugar por centrarse en los estudios. Las redes de apoyo, como la familia, los compañeros y los profesores, desempeñan un papel fundamental a la hora de ayudar a los estudiantes a superar el duelo y adaptarse a la pérdida. Por último, los resultados de esta investigación proporcionan recomendaciones para que las universidades apliquen políticas que ofrezcan apoyo individual y colectivo. Estas iniciativas pueden ayudar a los estudiantes en duelo a gestionar sus

emociones y sus responsabilidades académicas, lo que garantiza su bienestar general.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Duelo, luto, estudiantes universitarios, covid-19

Grief is a multidimensional reaction to the loss of something or someone to whom one has developed love or some form of emotional attachment (Shear et al., 2011). Its duration depends on several factors such as relationship with the deceased and the circumstances in which death occurs (Bonnanno and Kaltman, 2001). Responses to death tend to be diverse, still, multiple and painful losses can complicate grief (Bistricean and Shea, 2021; Sitrine et al., 2021).

Grief experiences vary by developmental stage (Weinstock et al., 2021). In childhood, death feels distant, with fears focused on caregivers. Adolescents, despite seeing death as unlikely, reflect on it more due to abstract thinking. In adulthood, death feels closer, requiring personal adaptation and resources (Erikson, 1968).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in near-death experiences and bereavement (Castellanos-Suarez, 2023; Joaquim et al., 2021), particularly in countries such as Perú, where by 2023, there were 4.5 million cases and more than 220,000 deaths (MINSA, 2024), placing Perú among the most affected countries regionally and globally (Ritchie et al., 2023). More than 90,000 children are orphaned due to the loss of their caregivers, resulting in one of the highest global orphan rates post-pandemics (Hillis et al., 2021). Thus, Peruvians at every developmental stage have experienced a complex experience with death over the last years.

The pandemic affected Peruvians unevenly. Most deaths occurred among adults aged 50-70 (MINSA, 2024), leaving many adolescents and youths without primary caregivers (Gutiérrez, 2023). It also exposed deep socioeconomic inequalities: the health system collapsed, and financially vulnerable families faced worsened conditions (ILO, 2023). Prolonged quarantine highlighted the digital gap with rural children facing far greater challenges in virtual schooling than their urban peers, widening academic achievement gaps (INEI, 2020).

The final part of adolescence -late adolescence- and the stage of early or young adulthood has been historically ignored in terms of their needs and characteristics in Perú (Pease et al., 2015, 2021). This was replicated during the pandemic. For example, the aid coming from the State focused on young children, specifically orphans due to COVID (*El Peruano*, 2022). However, young adults had to assume many of the burdens and

responsibilities, domestic and economic, of their parents, who tended to lean on their older children, to share tasks at home, to take care of elderly or young siblings and to find ways to support financially the family. This burden was heavier for women than for men (Castañeda and Contreras, 2022). Thus, even though death is better understood in late adolescence and young adulthood than in earlier stages of life, the experiences of bereavement and grief during the pandemic were complex.

Previous studies report that in the face of traumatic losses such as in pandemics, adolescents and young adults tend to suffer greater psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors than at other developmental stages (Mead, 2018; Weinstock et al., 2021). At the cognitive level, this stage involves more installed critical thinking that allows for greater reflexivity (Pease et al., 2015); which can shape the experience of grief and collaborate on elaborating more complex meanings. This will depend, however, on how enabled is the possibility of elaborating about loss and death, and on the resources available (Cooley et al., 2013). Therefore, avoidant coping, which is more common in young people, would be detrimental (Kar et al., 2021).

Likewise, at this stage, the configuration of the life project is particularly important (Erikson, 1968). One begins to inhabit the future imagined, explored and planned throughout early and mid-adolescence. Grief, however, involves challenges that disrupt these transitional processes, with a more intense experience of emotional distress when there is no social support (Weinstock et al., 2021). Also, they tend to feel distant from their peers who have not had significant losses (Ortiz, 2021; Weinstock et al., 2021).

When the person that dies is a primary caregiver, given the centrality of the family in the well-being of this population (Bistricean and Shea, 2021; Pease et al., 2021) its impact is significant. The loss of a caregiver may interfere with the viability of the life project of young people, particularly in collectivist societies (Rogoff, 2003; Cienfuegos-Martínez et al., 2016), such as Peruvian society, where individuals continue living during this stage with their family and where occupational goals are usually set considering them (Pease et al., 2021).

These issues are under-researched in Perú, but studies show that youth experience bereavement intensely and often in solitude (Johns et al., 2020; Gutiérrez, 2023). However, evidence also reports that family and teachers played a key role in their grieving processes (Escobar et al., 2020; Poma, 2022), despite feelings of loneliness. Thus, it is vital to examine how

universities support students coping with loss, as institutional environments can be crucial (Sirriner et al., 2021).

Taking all of these into consideration, we aim to investigate the grief experiences of college students in Perú, specifically in the context of COVID-19, in order to understand their needs and propose appropriate university policies. Thus, the main objective of this study is to analyze college students' experiences of loss, grief and growth in a private university of Lima, Perú. Specific objectives include i) to describe the experiences of loss and grief of these students, as well ii) to identify the social and institutional support they sought and received. We conducted a qualitative study employing a phenomenological design to explore the participants' experiences and meanings of grief (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Method

Participants

Participants were eight college students, aged between 20 and 27, from a university in Lima, Perú (see Table 1). They were part of the sample from a previous quantitative study conducted within the framework of this project (Velázquez et al., 2022), in which only private college students participated.

TABLE 1. Sociodemographic characteristics

#	Pseudonym	Age	Career	Place of birth	No. of deceased persons	Significant de- cedent ¹	Date of loss
1	Estrella	24	Management and Senior Management	Lima	1	Dad	February, 2021
2	Tomás	21	Music	Chincha	1	Mother	May, 2021
3	Patricia	20	Law	Lima	2	Mother and other loved ones	April, 2021
4	Ernesto	23	Civil Engineering	Huanca-velica	2	Dad and other loved ones	August, 2021
5	Zoila	21	Political Science	Chiclayo	1	Mother	February, 2021
6	Carlos	22	Law	Lima	1	Dad	February, 2021

1 The person the participant refers to throughout the interview is listed first, followed by other significant people they lost.

7	Roberto	27	Sociology	Lima	2	Beloved uncles and aunts	March, 2021
8	Manuel	20	Law	Lima	2	Beloved aunt	April, 2021

The project complied with all ethical considerations, including informed consent and participant protection protocols, evaluated and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Pontificia Universidad [anonymized] (120-2022-CEI-CCSSHHyAA/[anonymized]). In addition, mental health care spaces were provided for the research team.

Data collection techniques

A sociodemographic form (sex, gender, age, place of birth, current place of residence, faculty and semesters at the university), and an interview guide, which lasted approximately 90 minutes, were used. The interview protocol included three sections: (1) Experience of grief; (2) Search for support; and (3) Representations of grief. This study only considers the analysis of the first two. Interviews were conducted by expert researchers on these topics.

Procedure

Based upon the literature review we developed an interview protocol which was validated by a team of specialists in bereavement and the well-being of college students. We selected and contacted participants from the sample of a quantitative previous study (Velázquez et al., 2022). Participants were informed about the goals of the study, how they were selected, the use of the data collected, and our commitment to confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in a voluntary and flexible manner, prioritizing the well-being of participants. After completing the interviews, we transcribed and coded the information, eliminating personal data and assigning pseudonyms. Collected information was then organized and analyzed.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted based upon sections of the interview guide. Information was organized into themes assigning them meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2021) and into categories and subcategories that were named and defined according to the reported experiences of grief. Finally, a codebook was generated, which was collaboratively reviewed

by the entire research team. Subsequently, the written report of findings was developed.

Results and discussion

The thematic analysis identified 3 main themes: (1) Experiences and emotions related to pandemic grief; (2) Coping with pandemic grief; and (3) Support for pandemic grief. These aspects are illustrated in Graphic 1 and will be discussed in detail below.

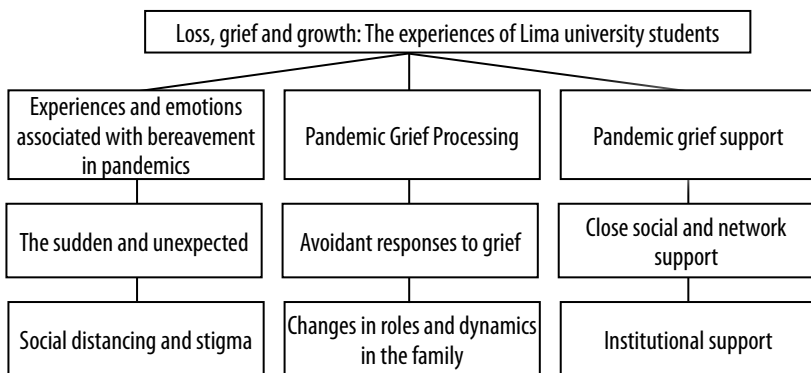


FIGURE 1. Topics and subtopics

Experiences and emotions associated with grief and bereavement during the pandemic

The grief experienced by college students during the pandemic had particular characteristics associated with the context. Death and illness were often sudden and unexpected, leaving little space for processing through farewells and rituals.

I received a call out of the blue and it was from my aunt, as I don't have much contact with my father's family, an unknown number called me and I answered and it was my aunt [...] she told me: «Your father is already in a coma... he is in intensive care, he has COVID» (Ernesto, 23 years old, deceased father).

As Ernesto describes, communications about the deterioration of their relatives' health or the death itself came out of the blue. This suddenness intensified the grief process, as individuals grappled with abrupt losses and significant changes in mourning and grief rituals (Bloomberg, 2021; Castellanos-Suárez, 2023; Ritchie et al., 2023). This difficulty is particularly pronounced among those who lost primary caregivers, reflecting the crucial role of family in the subjective well-being of this stage of life (Escobar et al., 2020; Pease et al., 2021).

The sudden and unexpected nature of these losses caused profound shock and sadness, especially since many participants experienced the loss of loved ones who died without a family member present (Strang et al., 2020). Ernesto (23), who lost his father, expressed: «When I received the call informing me that he was sick and in ICU, I was in shock... I didn't know what I was feeling, but I was sad and didn't know how to express it».

This state of shock and the presence of negative emotions were associated with the feeling of having unfinished business with their deceased loved ones: «it was difficult for me to accept it... because from one moment to the next I was practically alone and I couldn't enjoy the university stage with her, nor the achievements» (Tomás, 21 years old, deceased mother). These are certain issues that were not addressed or resolved and can no longer be discussed, photos of important moments that were not taken, or activities that were not carried out. As a result, it is common for them to reflect on how they can navigate their lives now that the person is no longer physically present (Prieto, 2018).

In addition, the regulation of social distancing applied during the pandemic further complicated the experiences of grief and bereavement. They could not see their relatives in hospitals when they were sick, nor could they see their relatives and friends for support. This alienation not only intensified their sense of loss, but also accentuated their longing for the presence of their loved ones as a source of support at such painful moments.

Seeing other people who want to hug you, who want to tell you that they are sorry for your loss and want to be with you, but they can't because you cannot be indoors with any person for fear that you might get infected [...] it was quite difficult (Estrella, 24, deceased father).

This isolation was especially evident in the inability to perform traditional rituals of mourning and grief, such as memorial services, vigils, and funerals.

You weren't able to say goodbye, hold a vigil or see him before he died [...] Without the pandemic, that was normal. People usually share, spend time with their families before, during, and after. But during the pandemic, it wasn't allowed, it wasn't possible. I think that's the hardest part (Patricia, 20, deceased main caregiver and other relatives).

This reality highlights that social distancing has had a significant impact on the mental health of those who lost loved ones during the pandemic. Specifically, it is corroborated that social distancing was an important stressor that affected the psychological well-being of college students

(Narváez et al., 2021). This is related to the absence of conventional grief processing practices, leaving them in loneliness, without the opportunity to say goodbye to their loved ones in a meaningful way and to feel supported during these difficult moments (Ceberio, 2021; Garzón et al., 2021; Ortiz, 2021; Weinstock et al., 2021). These are elements of grief experiences in pandemics that should be considered when analyzing the reality of college students.

This is especially important since, over time, the complication of grief often persists, manifesting itself as a prolonged sense of resignation and a kind of normalization of sadness, especially among those who have lost their primary caregivers: «You could say that I have no choice [...] obviously it still hurts, it's not something that I can leave in the past, I know that I will mourn my mother all my life, but there is not much I can do» (Zoila, 21, deceased mother). This enduring grief sometimes leads to difficulty and confusion in resuming daily routines or engaging in new activities. Several studies indicate that not sharing feelings or avoiding discussions about the deceased complicates young people's adaptation and their ability to either resume or initiate activities (Apelian and Nesteruk, 2017). This highlights the profound impact of loss on college students, affecting their life trajectories and future expectations (Arnett, 2006; Gallego and Isidro, 2019; Porter and Claridge, 2019).

In particular, for men who have lost their primary caregivers, grief has had a significant impact not only on their mental health—manifesting itself in the form of depression or anxiety—but has also been associated with physical health problems, such as gastrointestinal disorders. This caused widespread discomfort that complicated their grieving process. As can be seen in the following testimony.

My two uncles died almost at the same time, within a month or two of each other, which distressed me greatly, as I told you, I suffer from gastritis, and it was at that moment that I became so distressed that I vomited; I had severe stomach pains; and well, I had to go to the doctor to get a prescription, and somehow he prescribed me a medication with a few grams of diazepam, and that affected me academically and also as a result of the grief (Roberto, 27 years old, deceased uncles).

Thus, it is important to highlight gender differences in coping with grief, as men may find it more difficult to express their emotions. This phenomenon may be related to gender-differential socialization patterns (Thimm et al., 2020), in which masculinity is more associated with little or no expression of emotions. However, as in Roberto's case, they are manifested through the body.

This section shows that the intensity and characteristics of the emotions associated with grief in college students—such as sadness accompanied by instability—are influenced by various factors, including the sudden and serious nature of the losses and the unprecedented context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the inability to interact with others to ritualize their losses and receive support has had a significant impact on their grieving experience. These elements are crucial for regulating the intensity of grief (Gallego and Isidro, 2019).

Pandemic grief processing

The grieving process of college students was influenced by the pandemic experience. One of the main ways they did this was by avoiding remembering the deceased or the circumstances surrounding their death. Apparently, some resorted to more evasive coping strategies, such as avoiding visits to the cemetery, refraining from talking about their loved ones, or immersing themselves in activities such as sports, work, studies, or travel.

The only time I went to the cemetery was when I buried her, and I never went back. So, I feel like I'm avoiding going back, but at the same time it helps me cope with some things; so, it's also a little confusing because I don't know if it would be good to face it (Zoila, 21, deceased mother).

As in Zoila's case, avoidance alone is not enough because feelings of confusion and uncertainty still arise. Although this coping style is common among young people in mourning and can be psychologically harmful in the long term, it can serve as a valid method for processing loss in the moment (Manoogian et al., 2018). These findings are consistent with other studies indicating that some people tend to isolate themselves and refrain from sharing their feelings, either to process their emotions or to escape the reality of their grief (Escobar-Torres et al., 2020).

Avoidance strategies were also evident in academic life, as some participants chose to take on a greater number of courses as a way to honor their loved ones while keeping busy with their studies. For some, this approach represented a decision to adopt a tough and cold attitude to avoid confronting their emotions: (about continuing my studies) it was like making the decision to be strong and say, «Well, even though it sounds cold, I've lost someone, but life goes on and I have to deal with it, even if I don't want to» (Estrella, 24 years old, deceased father). This tendency may be related to the desire not to disrupt their academic and social development during this critical stage of development (Schwartz et al., 2018), but it could also be avoidance behavior.

However, another group of participants did choose to connect with their grief experience, some repeatedly and others occasionally. In this process, some expressed their emotions privately, for example, by writing letters, while others shared their feelings with those closest to them.

I remember that when we got back together [...] almost the whole family was there, and that had hardly ever been done again after years. My aunt's children and great-nephews (us) were together [...] we gathered in her honor, playing the songs, she liked, dancing, singing, there was even karaoke. In my case, I think it was the first time I sang in front of my family, because I had never dared to (Manuel, 20, deceased aunt).

At first, writing helped me, because I think I still had a lot to tell him; because my father, as I told you, passed away overnight. Something that calmed me was that I told him several things the day before and also the day it happened, but since he could no longer speak, I didn't get the answer I wanted (her voice breaks). But thinking about him and writing helped me a lot. I don't know how, but little by little you begin to accept it (Estrella, 24, deceased father).

Based on these testimonies, it can be observed that these actions facilitated a sense of closure, but mainly allowed for the ability to «let go» of the deceased. Likewise, there is personal growth and a possibility to redefine family relationships. This approach offers a more constructive way of coping with traumatic loss, promoting growth through communication. In this sense, they found comfort in remembering and honoring the deceased, which helped them alleviate their pain by focusing on the legacy and happy memories shared with their loved ones (Gutiérrez, 2023).

Additionally, participants reported seeking *new beginnings* as a means of processing their grief. Changes in their daily lives often involved relinquishing certain activities and adopting new routines, such as traveling, acquiring pets, or engaging in regular exercise.

[She took up sports] Because I didn't want to feel weak. I mean, sports, we're talking about something physical, but also, I think I related it to the emotional part. It was about integrating them. I didn't want to feel weak. I wanted to trust that I could protect myself from anything (Zoila, 21, deceased mother).

As Zoila's quote shows, committing to new routines or activities involves an effort to process and strengthen oneself in the grieving process. This need reflects the need for self-efficacy and security, which are characteristics of the search for personal growth. However, it is important to mention that, while these proactive practices serve as coping strategies for pandemic-related grief, participants indicated that they also functioned,

to some extent, as distractions from the intensity of their experiences. This highlights the complexity of grief among college students, reflecting both the desire for growth and the ongoing struggle to manage their emotions (Garzón et al., 2021; Ortiz, 2021).

Finally, it should also be noted that family dynamics have changed. In some cases, bonds were strengthened and communication and trust improved, but many report losses or breakdowns in their family relationships. Disagreements about some decisions, the lack of space to talk about the loss and associated emotions, and the feeling of not being able to count on family members were some of the situations that caused guilt, sadness and anger. Likewise, there were transformations in roles within families.

My relationship with my sister changed a lot. Before, my mom, my sister, and I fought a lot, and my dad was the one who helped us reconcile [...] After his death, of course, we no longer had that person to help us. So, if we didn't do it on our own, we'd never be able to live well, because now it's just the three of us together (Estrella, 24, deceased father).

I began to feel I now had the responsibility to take care of him [...]. I heard my mother inside me saying «Now, now you take care of him.» So, I couldn't ignore my father; I mean, I felt sorry for him because now I had to take care of him too (Zoila, 21, deceased mother).

These two testimonies show how participants, having no other choice, had to take on caregiving roles. Upon losing their caregivers, who were the heads of their households, they had to assume these responsibilities, such as caring for caregivers or their siblings. In both cases, the participants were women, who reported that they took on caregiving roles for their parents who were left alone and for their siblings. This reveals gender differences in caregiving, a role primarily assigned to women, even more so in times of pandemic (Castañeda and Contreras, 2022), making it important to consider this factor when addressing the needs of college students.

This evidences the individual and family challenge to process grief, as there was a new configuration of their identity and a renegotiation of roles (Porter and Claridge, 2019). This is a fundamental element to take into account in the grief processing of college students, as they are in a developmental stage of multiple transformations, and in a state of vulnerability for losing their caregivers.

This section highlights personal challenges and opportunities for growth, as well as changes in family dynamics resulting from the grieving

process during the pandemic, marked by sudden losses and the absence of farewells. While some people chose to avoid talking about their grief, others sought comfort and ways to honor their loved ones through support networks. It is essential to recognize the resources available to college students to help them navigate the experience of grief.

Pandemic grief support

Social support was mainly received from close relationships with family, partners, and friends. This support was primarily emotional, offering companionship, affection, and opportunities for dialogue during the grieving process. This support was especially significant for those who had lost their primary caregivers. In other words, participants recognized that family and partners play a central role during the grieving process.

Family was obviously the biggest support because they always talked to me, they were always there to see how I was doing, if I had eaten, how I was feeling. I do consider that the family plays a very important role in this stage of grief because whether you want to or not you are going to feel alone (Tomás, 21 years old, deceased mother).

One person who was there was my ex-girlfriend [...] she took her time and tried to support me (Manuel, 20 years old, deceased aunt).

This finding provides evidence that social support is a central resource for grief processing, especially in collectivist societies where the family plays a fundamental role (Rogoff, 2003; Cienfuegos-Martínez et al., 2016). Specifically, considering the participants' accounts, it is important that they feel valued, listened to and loved, and thus achieve emotional expression and calm (Poma, 2022; Gutiérrez, 2023; Rigalt and López, 2023).

In addition, participants indicated that their search for social support went beyond family and friends. This included specialized psychological and psychiatric assistance, as well as spiritual-religious support, which offered them the opportunity to participate in necessary rituals.

Receiving specialized help was important because it helped me to understand my feelings and to be able to reconcile with myself, with the person who had died, my father [...] this was the moment to start a process of forgiveness (Estrella, 24 years old, deceased father).

(On religion) It helped them (her family) in part, because they felt they were doing something to remember or honor my aunt [...] it made them feel calmer and, therefore, it also made me feel a little calmer (Manuel, 20 years old, deceased aunt).

As can be seen in the participants' testimonies, these experiences provided them with additional resources to process their grief. Furthermore,

this support was not only for them, but also for their families. Feeling that the family also feels comforted helps in the grieving process and, in some way, provides relief.

Thus, this type of support is essential, as it allows for the processing of grief and the management of the complex emotions associated with it (Tan and Andriessen, 2021). Therefore, when it comes to supporting grief, it is important to have a broad support network through which college students can find support, including the universities themselves.

In terms of institutional support, they mentioned some grief support resources provided by the university, such as psychological care, workshops, and financial assistance (e.g., access to scholarships for orphans), considering them useful and necessary: «I received some emails from the university health services [...] I made an appointment and, since then, I have been seeing a psychologist regularly» (Tomás, 21 years old, mother deceased). This is a service that is offered, and which the participant does not necessarily seek, but which helps them in their grieving process. In addition, the students mentioned the support, understanding, and flexibility of their teachers, an aspect also highlighted in other studies (Poma, 2022; Rigalt and López, 2023).

However, many feel that college is not the best place to deal with grief, due to its demands and discomfort with the environment: «Being at the university was complicated for me; college doesn't give you time for many things [...] sometimes I went to the psychologist every fifteen days, that was my support every fifteen days, to free myself, to let go» (Tomás, 21, deceased mother). In that sense, grief management, then, remains a challenge in universities, which must continually adapt to the needs of each student (Bistricean and Shea, 2021; SIRRINE et al., 2021). It is therefore essential that they recognize their key role in supporting the mental health and grief process of students, complementing the support of family, partners and peers.

Conclusions

This study analyzed grief experiences among college students at a private university in Lima, Peru, during COVID-19. The analysis showed that death shifted from a distant concept to a pervasive presence in their lives. Beyond losing loved ones, students faced financial, occupational, mental, and physical health challenges (Menzies et al., 2020; SIRRINE et al., 2021). Many assumed new family roles due to the loss of economically responsible relatives (Gutiérrez, 2023), finding support in family, partners, and peers. Motivated by the memory of their loved ones, students are increasingly focused on studies and careers, reflecting Peru's cultural emphasis

on the centrality of family and higher education as a vehicle for improving their socioeconomic status (Cueto et al., 2018; Pease et al., 2021, Pease et al., 2024, Rojas and Flores, 2025).

The experiences were sudden, unexpected and traumatic due to the COVID-19 context (Bistricean and Shea, 2021; Gutierrez, 2023; Johns et al., 2020; Weinstock et al., 2021). Therefore, it was more complicated to elaborate, especially for those who had lost close loved ones and who presented previous mental health problems (Joaquim et al., 2021). This generated diverse processing responses: while some avoided their grief, others sought emotional support.

Much of this depended on their role in their families and relationship with the loved one. Thus, bereavement often resulted in multiple role changes within families, which added stress for young people (Porter and Claridge, 2019) and required new coping strategies. In addition to this stress, social distancing during the pandemic exacerbated grief by limiting in-person goodbyes and support, forcing many to grieve in isolation this complicated experience and complicating their ability to process the loss (Mayland et al., 2020; Weinstock et al., 2021). Despite the multiple difficulties, their capacity to re-signify and/or rethink their loss experiences, as well as to seek and receive help, is highlighted. Social support is thus crucial in grief, especially because family members, partners and friends accompany and share rituals to process it. This aspect is fundamental, as they are the ones who represent a protective factor in the most complicated grief processes (Gallego and Isidro, 2019), especially in collectivist societies, in which well-being and identity are adjusted and strengthened in relation to the family and the collective (Rogoff, 2003; Cienfuegos-Martínez et al., 2016; Pease et al., 2025).

Finally, participants acknowledged some benefits of university and classroom initiatives, but stressed the need for more institutional actions (Poma, 2022; Rigalt and Lopez, 2023). Although there is some support identified as resources offered by the university, the belief that it is not a space for grief support limits even their approach to the very resources offered to them. This tension should be overcome by the university system not only by offering more available resources, but also by showing itself to be a space in which affective needs, including those associated with grief processes, are allowed to be expressed.

Such efforts can help students grow after traumatic events such as bereavement (Lundberg et al., 2023) by addressing their needs and supporting grief coping. Universities should adopt policies that promote emotional well-being, particularly for students at risk for mental health problems

(Joaquim et al., 2021). Given the impact of caregiver loss on identity and the transition to adulthood (Porter and Claridge, 2019; Ortiz, 2021), individual support and community activities that ritualize grief and create shared meanings are essential (Cooley et al., 2013; Gallego and Isidro, 2019; Poma, 2022; Rigalt and López, 2023).

To sum up, this study attempted to understand grief among the university population of Lima during the pandemic. The qualitative nature of the research allows us to identify how the experiences and processes lived by this group of participants are represented based on their shared experiences of grief and being college students, while taking into account that much of this experience and the meanings associated with it.

One limitation is that the participants belonged to a private institution, which may restrict the representation of the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of the country, as well as generalizations of the grief experience. Based on the results shared here, future studies may work with guidelines that allow establishing contrasts with other populations and also propose criteria to analyze the degree of generalization of the findings identified here. Consideration should be given to including young people from different educational levels and sociocultural contexts, as well as exploring gender differences in the grief and bereavement experience.

Contribución de autoría

María Angélica Pease Dreibelbis participó en las fases de conceptualización, curación de datos, análisis de datos, investigación, metodología, *software*, supervisión, validación, visualización, redacción del borrador original, y redacción, revisión y edición del texto final.

Rafaella Andrea de la Puente Ronceros participó en las fases de conceptualización, curación de datos, análisis de datos, investigación, metodología, recursos, *software*, validación, visualización, redacción del borrador original, y redacción, revisión y edición del texto final.

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Tesania Eva Velazquez Castro participó en las fases de adquisición de fondos, investigación, metodología, administración del proyecto, supervisión, visualización, y revisión y edición del texto final.

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