



SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PATTERNS OF GRIEF: IDENTIFYING DIFFERENCES THROUGH EXISTING EVIDENCES

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ABSTRACT **Background:** Grief is mainly associated with loss of a loved one, however taking an extended approach grief can also be seen among those who are surviving dreadful illness diseases.

Methods: The present article reviews the concept of grief with this extended approach and examines the existing evidences. The research papers, essays and case examples are examined for identifying expressions of grief on the basis of demographic characteristics i.e. gender, age, role/relationship and social position of the deceased as well as bereaved person. Grief has also been examined in relation to the culture of the family and wider society. Grief of the person-in-situation i.e. survivors of terminal illness and victims of crime is discussed in light of research findings and case examples.

Results: The close examination of the evidences reviewed in this article highlighted the differences in expressions of grief on the basis of age, gender, social roles, cultural context and social ethos suggesting that grief is socially and culturally patterned.

Conclusion: People experience grief differently which impact their adaptation to the loss. It is important to understand the cause and process of grief to prepare an action plan for the bereaved members.

KEYWORDS : Grief, Bereavement, Grief theories, adaptation to loss, end of life care

INTRODUCTION

Grief is one of the natural and universally occurring human responses through all age groups.

Grief represents a loss of someone or something important to us like death of a loved one, ending of a relationship, loss of a job, valuables and diagnosis of a serious illness. The term grief many a times is misunderstood as synonym to bereavement and mourning. It is important to understand that the three terminology namely grief, bereavement and mourning have different meanings. Though, grief is a normal response to loss which can be a physical, emotional, behavioural, social, cultural or spiritual, while bereavement is the time period after a loss during which grief is being experienced. Mourning has reference to the process by which people adapt to the loss. Thus mourning includes customs, rituals and set of rules to be performed for coping with a loss. Though loss is *sin-qua-non* of grief, but it is not necessarily the loss of a relative by death. During our life-phases, many people grief for loss of a relationship, any damage to one's own self due to terminal illness may also attribute to grief (Goldsworthy, 2005).

METHODS

The present paper assess the pattern of grief not only from death and dying perspective but it also covers grief experience of the survivors of the dreadful diseases. This paper attempts to examine if experience of grief is different across age groups, gender, roles, relationship, social position, culture, work organisation or terminal disease. The aim here is not to weigh who experience more grief but reflects on the evidences to examine if grief differs on the basis of personal, social and cultural factors. Thus, research studies focusing on grief of the parents and spouse were examined and the findings were discussed in reference to gender of the bereaved and relationship with the deceased. Grief is further discussed in relation to social position of the deceased by highlighting examples of social and charismatic personalities of the world. Further, grief experience is examined among the survivors of terminal illness like cancer. This paper revisits some of the popular theories of grief in order to examine how grief is presented in existing theories or models.

RESULTS

The reviewed researches and cases were grouped under social pattern, gender differences, social position of the deceased, cultural differences and grief of the survivors of terminal diseases.

Social patterns of grief

Durkheim's premise-"grief and mourning is socially patterned" was reviewed by many scholars (Prior, 1989). Lindsay Prior worked on the same line for "social organisation of death". Lindsay analysed 415 obituary messages published in newspapers in Belfast during 1981. His work focused on the post-death grief experienced by the relatives of deceased which was expressed publically through messages in newspapers and did not cover the private expressions of sentiments.

Prior cited a couple of historical and anthropological cases of African and Indonesian communities to illustrate that grief is socially variable. Prior narrated some of the messages to support the public expressions of grief by the bereaved family. While classifying messages on the basis of demographic characteristics of the deceased, Prior found remarkable differences on the basis of gender, marital status, age groups and occupational roles as more notices were for male, married, below 60 years of age and manual workers. This suggests that demographic factors (age, gender, marital status and work position) made an impact on grief intensity of the bereaved.

The practice of putting messages seems to be quite common in western societies as Prior could find messages for 386 death out of 415 deaths in his area of operation, but this is not a general practice in traditional societies like India where this is the realm of rich class only suggesting that such kind of analysis could have never been possible in traditional societies and developing economies. The messages reviewed by Prior also highlighted the intensity of grief associated with mode of death e.g. sudden accidental death, hospital death, murder (political activity/army), or victims of disease like cancer. He supported that grief for murdered victims were expressed not only by family members but by friend, kinship groups, political and social groups and so received maximum messages. He further shared that there is another complete categories inclusive of infant, stillborn babies, disabled babies who did not receive any message, suggesting that grief in such cases is either low in intensity or not expressed publically. This suggests that severity and intensity of grief is directly proportional to the social position of the deceased and disruptions experienced by the grieved person due to this loss.

Gender Differences In Grief: Parents And Spouse

Prior's writings revealed that on the death of an infant, grief is not expressed publically (Prior, 1989). He could not present if grief was felt privately or not as his work focused only on the public expression of grief, but other researchers worked on the premise that 'loss of a child is one of the most stressful situation for a family' (Beutel, Willner, Deckardt, Von Rad, & Weiner, 1996; Dyregrov & Matthiesen, 1987). Researchers studied parental differences in grief following the death of an infant child. One of the studies covered a sample of 117 parents after 1-4 years of death of the child using standardized inventories to study grief reactions and statistically analysed the data (Dyregrov & Matthiesen, 1987). The study revealed that as compared to fathers, mothers had strong anxiety reactions, high usage of self reproach, more restless and became insecure to the surviving child. Parents agreed that mothers' grief was more severe and longer as compared to the fathers. Another study almost after a decade studied couples shortly after miscarriage (n=56), 6 months (n=47) and 12 months (n=45) later (Beutel et al., 1996). The study brought similar findings highlighting that women react more heavily to such episode and reflect more depressive responses than men. The two studies emphasized that men grieve less intensively than women, they cry less and feel less need to

talk about it. But on the other hand an essay highlighted the grief experienced by a father even after 18 years of his stillborn daughter (Anonymous, 2012).

Another essay documenting the experiences of bereaved spouse to their partner's death reported that widowers expressed less overt emotions, preferred to be with their own selves as compared to widows (Littlewood J, 2001). Men were more willing to contemplate remarriage earlier than widows suggesting that intensity of grief for women was much higher than the men.

Grief And Social Position Of The Deceased

Prior's work presented grief differences on the basis of occupation status and the nature of death of the deceased highlighting more grief responses for the manual workers and victims of murder in comparison to the non-manual workers and natural, expected death. This suggested that social position of the deceased plays a role in grief process. In such cases not only the family experiences grief, but the neighbourhood, community and society at large experience grief whether or not they are related to the deceased. This is here supported by citing examples of the world famous personalities. The Assassination of the first lady prime minister of India Smt. Indira Gandhi in October 1984 evoked unrest among the masses for years altogether around the country. The world again can't forget the tragic death of Princess Diana. Millions of people queued on the streets of London to offer their Princess the final goodbye and countless bouquet were left outside her residence. Following her death suicide among the women of same age was dramatically high in England and Wales than ever before for next few months.(McVeigh T). This suggests that anti-social incidences like murder or unexpected deaths evoke grief reactions at the societal level which can be further explored in future research. The work organisations associated with the deceased also have a specific culture which influences grief experience of the bereaved. For instance, in defence organizations soldiers are given the respected state funeral and the death of the soldiers is grieved by the entire Nation. In India, the widows and the mothers of the deceased soldiers are consoled by the family and friends to take pride instead of crying and disrespecting the soul of the martyr.

Grief And Cultural Differences

The role of culture for expressions of grief has been studied in literature (Alford & Catlin, 1993). This research examined two cross-cultural samples of similar mean age from America and Spain and studied the perception of two groups of people towards the loss of a loved one. In comparison to America, Spanish participants reported greater negative impact on their self-esteem but more positive effect on their liking and trust for significant others reflecting different patterns of social relations in the two countries. This emphasized the significance of culture, socio-economic conditions and patterns of grief.

Another study using focus group discussion with people experiencing grief from different cultural groups presented the dynamic, pervasive and highly individualized nature of grief (Cowles, 1996). This study highlighted that even though time makes a difference but whenever memories bubble up one tend to be sad and feel emotional pain. While emphasizing that grief is unique to each individual, researchers have acknowledged the differences between cultural groups in terms of rituals, traditions and expressions. In India, a woman in Hindu culture is required to take a bath for her husband's death rituals, wear white clothes and take off all the ornaments. Such rituals intensify her grief by reminding her of irrevocable loss in her life. The famous work by Shirley on Hindu death rituals has informed us that Hindu widow is considered to be permanently impure and inauspicious (Firth, 2001).

Grief And The Survivor

Grief is experienced not only by the bereaved but the persons surviving a dreadful disease also grieve for themselves which is apparent from "the poems of Gitanjali" a posthumous publication by an Indian girl who died of cancer at the age of 16 years (Gitanjali, 1991). She wrote numerous expressions and hid them at different places in her room to hide her grief and sorrow from rest of her family members. Gitanjali's poems reflect inwards communication expressing her sufferings, sorrows and loneliness. Her poems also present spiritual communication to the God to end her unbearable pain and constant agony. In another qualitative study from London, the cancer patients regarded their lives as 'empty' and 'devoid of contentment'(Koffman et al., 2012). Cowles also highlighted some of the antecedents situations to grief like divorce which was regarded by the participants as 'worse

than death', illness, employment and financial loss(Cowles, 1996).

DISCUSSION

The reviewed researches were mainly retrospective and conducted in western context. A glimpse of the literature(Alford & Catlin, 1993; Anonymous, 2012; Dyregrov & Matthiesen, 1987; Kleinman, 2012; Rosenblatt, 1988; Segal, Wilson, Bouchard Jr, & Gitlin, 1995; Stroebe & Schut, 1998; Walter, 2010) reflects that grief has been mainly studied in relation to death and bereavement. It is well recognized that even though human beings have universal needs but they have different ways of expressing themselves and the same may be true for grief as well. Literature suggests the role of culture in making grief experience different for people from various societies (Alford & Catlin, 1993; Stroebe & Schut, 1998; Walter, 2010). The literature discussed here even though is quite different in its methodological approach but highlighted gender and relationship differences in expressions of grief. All the reviewed studies, examined grief from objective point of view using quantitative approach only, while a triangular approach using an integration of qualitative methods would have given much better picture to examine grief which itself is subjective in nature. Since data was collected using written questionnaire so these findings are limited only to the English literate class and the uneducated or non-English literate people are out of preview which may have a different kind of responses to grief. Thus, these studies do not say anything if education makes a difference in the grief experience of the people. The existing theories of grief present highly individualized nature of grief and adaptation. One of the earliest theory by Freud viewed grief as a desolated process whereby the individual detach himself from the social world, gradually release his bond with the deceased and in this process start looking at building new relationships, thus diverting his libidinal energy from deceased to new object/person(Freud, 1917). Lindemann's model of grief and coping is more or less in line with Freud's theory, whereby he stated that grieving process at the first instance involves acceptance of the loss by the bereaved person, followed by adjusting to a new environment without the deceased which require him to form new relationships(Buglass, 2010). Lindaman identified five features of grief namely distress, preoccupation with thought of the loss, guilt, hostility and change in routine behaviour pattern. Kubler-Ross while working as psychiatrist with dying patients presented a five stages model of grief and adaptation which included denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance mainly in the same sequence (Buglass, 2010). But people do not always pass through the grief stages in an ordered sequence; some may experience more than one stages at a time. Bowlley's theory of attachment placed emphasis on the relationship bonds that we all develop as a result of our interaction with the people around our social circle. Bowlley derived his theory on the basis of separation anxiety a child experience while getting detached from the mother. On the same lines, Bowlley presented a four stages model through which individual pass in case of death of a loved one(Buglass, 2010). The four stages were numbing, yearning or searching, disorganisation or despair and reorganisation which was considered as healthy grieving process as individuals prepare themselves for new roles.

In modern context, Stroebe & Schut presented dual process model of grief and coping which described the process of coping of the bereaved individual as well as associated life-style changes(Buglass, 2010). The dual model of grief suggests that the state of loss is a combination of acceptance and confrontation. The dual model focus on loss oriented and restoration oriented processes which the bereaved people pass through following a loss.

The loss oriented process represents that feeling of void, reflecting on memories, crying for the loss, while the restoration oriented process focus on adapting to the new roles and taking over the roles which a deceased person used to perform. The person keeps on switching between accepting the situation of loss and confronting it as accepting to the new roles becomes challenging for the grieving person.

This suggests that practitioners need to consider that every individual experience loss in a unique way depending upon their personal constructs which determine individual's emotional and behavioural response to the loss.

Thus practitioners need to begin where the grieving person is and a customized approach is required. As the bereaved person pass through different phases of grief, it is important to help them recognize their emotions and associated triggers so that the disturbing emotions can be managed effectively.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, loss and related grief is an omnipresent reality associated with innumerable changes in our life. Although literature presented highly individualized nature of grief, but it also supported the role of demographic and cultural factors in making grief experience different for people suggesting that differences exist on the basis of gender, social roles, position, culture and social ethos which are further shaped by family, political structure and legal mechanisms thus supporting that "grief is socially patterned and channelled". It is important to understand the cause and process of grief to prepare an action plan for the bereaved members. During the bereavement process it is important to help the bereaved members to appropriately grieve their losses for healing and recovery.

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