Surviving Bereavement

The experience of adapting following exposure to difficult bereavement

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree of qualification.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Gerlinde Davis
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Abstract

A minor, yet substantial proportion of people exposed to the death of a significant other, experience marked distress which does not abate over time, constituting a risk to emotional and physical health. Most research examining adaptation to bereavement has utilised quantitative research designs that measure levels of distress over time. Little is known about how those who do suffer a difficult grief response begin to adapt to bereavement. Less is known about how they experience their continuing life, including how their relationship with the person who has died changes as the bereaved adapt and accommodate the loss. Additionally most research on adaptation to bereavement has been limited to conjugal bereavement.

This project explores and examines the experiences of people who have been exposed to the death of a significant other. A qualitative approach, utilising narrative methods in the collection and analysis of the data obtained from in-depth interviews, has been used. Purposive sampling has been used to target those who had suffered a difficult response to the loss, but who then improved following grief counselling. Eight participants who had sustained the loss of a spouse, a parent or child, were interviewed, using in-depth interviews where the participants were invited to tell their story.

Findings from the study suggest that the need to maintain or distance the connections between the deceased and bereaved are linked to the qualities and place of the relationship in the bereaved’s life prior to the death. Other findings include the central place of loneliness in the bereaved’s experience of life following the death of the other and the influential nature of social connections in the bereaved’s experiencing of
“difficult grief” and adaptation to bereavement. Loneliness has emerged as a pervasive theme in this study and has the potential to complicate the bereaved's adaptation to bereavement.

The study shows that adapting to bereavement involves processing ties to self, the deceased and significant others in the bereaved’s ongoing life. Beneficial counselling experiences are those that support the bereaved in (re)processing ties in these three areas of relationship which included a) the self, b) the deceased and c) significant others in the bereaved's interpersonal context.

Successful counselling interventions also provide bereaved survivors opportunities to express their grief/pain authentically, whilst exploring their complex meanings around the loss. Implications for therapeutic practice with the bereaved include the need for therapists to be able to identify and facilitate the bereaved’s issues of “self” and “identity” that were challenged through exposure to bereavement. In this respect, therapists need to be open to variations around the relinquishing or maintaining of ties with the deceased. This study also confirms that the therapeutic relationship is crucial to a positive outcome. In counselling the therapist temporarily joins the bereaved’s interpersonal context forming a support which compensates for empathic failure in other relationships.
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