

“Power and Prejudice”: Thinking Differently About Grief

Abstract
This article explores some of the challenges we face as educators and practitioners in thinking and teaching about, and responding to, grief. Questioning the capacity of prevailing theoretical perspectives on grief to adequately capture the complexity and diversity of people’s grief experiences, we consider the power and prejudices we potentially bring to our work. We reflect on the importance of being open to differing worldviews and assumptions; on developments in theoretical approaches concerning grief and grieving; on the challenges presented by intrapersonal, psychologically-oriented theories; and on embracing inclusive grief education and practice. We emphasise the need to work with grieving individuals in ways that encourage the development of justice and shared power and meanings, and awareness of the particular personal, social, cultural, spiritual and political contexts in which they live.

Introduction
This article explores whether prevailing theoretical perspectives on grief adequately capture the complexities and diversity of people’s lived experiences. As four educators and practitioners, we reflect on some of the challenges and dilemmas we face in thinking, teaching about, and responding to, grief. This article focuses on four key issues we have debated with each other: being open to differing worldviews and assumptions; consideration of developments in theoretical approaches; understanding the challenges presented by intrapersonal, psychologically-oriented theories; and embracing inclusive grief education and practice. We hope to encourage readers to reflect similarly on assumptions, and on the power of discourses that heavily influence our thinking and ways of working. In doing this, we assume that despite recent shifts in thinking about grief and grieving, practice may sometimes continue to reflect ideas from earlier theories. These theories may fail to recognise the diversity of people’s grief experiences.

Being Open to Differing Worldviews and Assumptions
The title of this article plays on that of Jane Austen’s novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen’s opening line in this novel is one of the infamous lines in English literature: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1813/1972, p. 51). This line emphasises a notion of a prevailing “truth”, universality and “must”, and the nature of “right” relationships, of possessions, and assumptions. The story within *Pride and Prejudice* unfolds to show how profound an influence this statement is — as a statement of “fact” about relationships, of beliefs that could be challenged, of beliefs that can cause great damage, and of beliefs that can bring structure and certainty to how we should behave. In our reflections on the power (our interpretation of pride) and prejudices we potentially bring to our work, we believe that the quote captures some of the ways in which dominant worldviews influence people, including educators, practitioners and grieving people alike. The article’s title, “Power and Prejudice”, recognises the imposition of particular concepts or assumptions that are sometimes made about grief. Professional use of power can be a positive force. Yet practitioners and educators can use power and authority in ways that negate the lived experiences of others. Our beliefs, values and attitudes are often so ingrained in our experience and sense of self that we may not acknowledge the impact they may have in our professional exchanges.

One of the challenges we as educators and practitioners have faced in our multicultural contexts is how to be more open to the needs and rights of individuals, families and communities when worldviews and experiences can differ so profoundly. While conceptualisations are needed to inform teaching and practice, and necessarily influence processes of intervention, increasingly, questions are raised about the implicit cultural and individualising assumptions embedded in these conceptualisations. The danger is that if these assumptions do not match with the lived experiences of people who grieve, they can become prescriptions rather than descriptions.

When thinking about any phenomenon, we draw on assumptions, images, beliefs, values and perceptions, as well as empirical knowledge. This is so with our interpretations of various expressions and experiences of grief. Yet these interpretations can become misinterpretations. The positive emotions of laughter and smiling in bereaved individuals are a good case in point. In part, through the influence of traditional grief theories, the expression of these positive emotions in grieving individuals has often been interpreted as inappropriate, and equated with denial (Bonanno, 2009). Recent research, however, has shown that individuals laugh and smile in periodic bursts throughout the grieving process as they adapt to their loss, oscillating between reflecting on the reality of the loss and engaging with the world around them (Bonanno, 2009).

It is essential to reflect continually on the assumptions and prejudices we make and on the power we give to them. Within all of our personal and professional domains, each one of us holds onto various worldviews and assumptions, many of which change as a natural process of living and developing. Increasingly, there is recognition of the significance and impact of our positional power and influence as professionals in the human services (e.g. Mullally, 2002; Tew, 2002, 2005; Thompson, 2003). As referred to at this article’s...
beginning, if this power is appropriately acknowledged and used it can be seen as a positive influence, but to suggest there is no influence fails to recognise how very differently we are positioned in the social hierarchy. We all bring power to our relationships. We influence the teaching and therapeutic practice agenda through our silences, our questions, the affirmations we give and the challenges we make.

Our assumptions, worldviews and theories have an essential function in helping us to structure our experiences, in enabling predictability and continuity (Marris, 1996), and in determining what we observe and the meaning we make of these observations. Thus theories for understanding and responding to grief, for example, provide us with ways of responding to people who are in pain and are suffering. Questions emerge, though, in relation to either what we do or do not observe, what we may misunderstand, or the meanings we may impose. It is therefore of fundamental importance to engage in reflective practice in order to critically examine our assumptions about the circumstances of the situation as well as our own core beliefs and assumptions that are influencing our work. Without such reflection, we may embrace a particular understanding without question and miss a fuller openness to others, which is central to the counselling relationship or in fostering broader understanding among learners and students.

Consideration of Developments in Theoretical Approaches

Through our experiences as educators and practitioners, we are often confronted by issues that call into question the foundations of grief theories. A student asks in class, for example, “Why do we have to focus on feelings?” when working with people experiencing grief. The teaching typically reflects a traditional view influenced by psychoanalytic theory and the notion of catharsis — feelings must be expressed overtly and worked through for grief to be resolved (Freud, 1917, 1957; Worden, 2009). It is easy as practitioners and educators, as predominantly a group of people who value emotion-focused coping, to emphasise the heart and gut experiences. How do we come to understand and value, though, the processes of avoidance and denial, which can be therapeutic for some (Ginzberg, Solomon, & Bleich, 2002)? At the core of many grief interventions is the strategy of articulating and expressing emotions as the “normal”, cathartic process. The efficacy of this strategy, especially for those experiencing “normal” grief, has been debated in recent times (e.g. Larson & Hoyt, 2007; Neimeyer & Currier, 2008).

Consistent with these ideas of catharsis and confrontation with emotions, counsellors may, for example, often actively support and encourage clients to attend a viewing of the deceased person’s body. These actions are seen to assist the cathartic process and to “make real” the death. This is in accordance with Worden’s Task Model of coping with bereavement, in which the first task of coping is to accept the reality of the loss (Worden, 2009). If people choose not to attend a viewing, perhaps there are alternative possibilities to help them accept the loss that are more appropriate to their particular personal and cultural experiences and beliefs. Underlying these issues is a concern to help those who are grieving to adapt to, and integrate, their loss experience and to develop a more positive, albeit changed forever, sense of wellbeing over time.

The current theoretical emphasis on the Dual Process Model of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2008) enables recognition of these more flexible and unique ways of moving through grief experiences. With an emphasis on oscillation between a restoration and loss orientation, a more acute attunement is encouraged to each person’s, family’s or community’s grief experience within their particular cultural context. This model of grief challenges the earlier Phase or Stage (Bowlby, 1961; Parkes, 1972) and Task (Worden, 2009) approaches to grief experiences, yet these latter approaches can appear more entrenched in practice and teaching. In adopting a deep appreciation for the complexities of oscillation, we are confronted with the assumptions we make about the ways in which people grieve that have been significantly shaped by these earlier theories.

Understanding the Challenges Presented by Intrapersonal Psychologically-oriented Theories

In light of this situation, we reflect on dominant ways in which grief is understood and how these may inadvertently create prejudices. These prejudices may obscure the experiences of people’s grief.

Key theoretical perspectives that have significantly influenced our understanding of grief have a strong intrapersonal psychological orientation, often with little acknowledgement of the implications of the diversity of people’s social and cultural contexts. They include the aforementioned Phase or Stage theories (Bowlby, 1961; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Parkes, 1972; Rando, 1993; Worden, 2009); early versions of the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999); and recent arguments for the inclusion of the classification of Prolonged Grief Disorder in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008). We acknowledge the valuable contribution and usefulness of these ideas, but note they have maintained a focus primarily on the inner world of people’s grief experiences. Under these circumstances, the principal resource for adaptation and adjustment is internal cognitive processes.

A focus solely on internal cognitive processes needs to be questioned if we are to place grief within a personal, social and cultural framework. To illustrate this point, we consider the meaning of yearning as part of the grief response, before reflecting on the impact on grieving of the modern day Western world’s emphasis on rationality, productivity and outcomes.

The experience of yearning is known to be a common reaction within grief (Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008; Bonanno, 2009). It has been emphasised as a major “symptom” of prolonged grief (Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008). Much more needs to be known about aspects of yearning such as what “healthy” yearning might be and the extent to which people yearn for others in non-grief situations. Additionally, as Rosenblatt (2008) points out, to apply concepts of grief pathology across cultures is a risky business. He cites the example from Wikan’s 1988 study, where an Egyptian mother who was “close to catatonic with grief for years after a child died would not be seen as deviant there” (Rosenblatt, 2008, p. 213). If we hold that the experience of grief is unique and no two people grieve in the same way, on what basis then is yearning a significant concern? Intense yearning may be pathologised or regarded as inappropriate, yet we need...
to know more about what makes for healthy yearning or, indeed, who should be the judge of this. Given that attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008) is so central to our concept of wellbeing, to pathologise dependence and yearning when we need it so much and understand it so little may result in a prejudiced assessment of a person’s experience of grieving. To assess an appropriate length of time for yearning or an appropriate level of intensity requires consideration of the particular social and cultural, as well as personal, contexts of the person concerned. This argument applies equally to other personal expressions of grief.

The Western world’s emphasis on rationality and productivity has also influenced the experience of grief and when and how it should be expressed. As Robert Reynolds asserts, “Who has time to grieve and who apart from the professional has time to attend to the grieving?” (2004, p. 148). Western societies seem to afford little time to grieving, which has been regarded as something to be “managed”. As a result, cumulative stress and loss, and secondary losses such as financial losses, or loss of landscape, place and space are often not recognised, acknowledged and mourned. Typically this has been overlooked for Aboriginal Australians, migrants and refugees. Grief is not “productive” in societies aspiring to greater productivity.

**Embracing Inclusive Grief Education and Practice**

One of the greatest challenges to prevailing conceptualisations of grief has been a questioning of the dominance of Western, individualised theories of how people grieve. Generalisations stemming from such conceptualisations fail to appreciate both the unique individual contexts and experiences of grief, and the wider social, structural and cultural contexts that influence grief trajectories (e.g. Rosenblatt, 2001, 2008).

In addition to a focus on the emotional and cognitive aspects of grief, we need to think more inclusively about what it means to embrace differing cultural and spiritual dimensions and worldviews. For example, Cecilia Chan and her colleagues (2006) in Hong Kong have developed an approach to grief and trauma management that challenges conventional Western models. This approach draws on a holistic view of health and Eastern spiritual teachings, and physical techniques (e.g. yoga, meditation, and psycho-education that fosters meaning reconstruction), aspects of which are increasingly being incorporated into Western practices. Chan, Chan, and Ng (2006) argue that there is a lack of evidence to support the idea that confronting one’s grief is more effective than avoiding it. This is challenging in times where indicators, assessment and treatment-oriented interventions have focussed on the need to “work through” one’s grief, as referred to earlier in this article.

Chan and her colleagues (2006) explore alternate meanings. They explain, for example, that Buddhist beliefs about suffering can be normalising and calming, that suffering is inevitable to human existence. They explore Daoist teachings about unpredictability; the notion of accepting whatever comes in life because of the ever-changing reality of life and nature. They also consider Confucianism, which focusses on perseverance and being humble in the face of adversity. Very different sets of beliefs and worldviews are shaped by culture and religion, and become ways of living meaningfully in the world. What does grief “mean” according to such spiritual and cultural beliefs?

Current Western conceptualisations of grief have also tended to overlook or minimise differing social dimensions. For example, Grace Christ (2008) highlights the role of the media in shaping grief experiences following the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001. Interestingly, Reynolds (2004, p. 149) suggests that the practice of public ritual appeals to contemporary Western society, as it is a potentially minimising, time-efficient and cost-effective way of “managing” grief. Concurrent stressors (particularly financial but others such as homophobia or racism), or the ways in which counselling has been aimed at the articulate middle-classes may in fact contribute directly to a disenfranchising of grief for many. Those groups who are most disadvantaged in society are generally the least likely to receive the best services (Reynolds, 2002).

Contemporary conceptualisations of grief also tend to overlook or minimise different response cultures that bring to people’s grief experiences particular resources and attitudes. For example, an emergency services culture brings a proactive, assertive outreach support perspective, compared with a grief services culture, which generally supports the view that the use of such services are best sought out by grieving people themselves. Do these different approaches result in more of a focus on crisis and trauma or on grief, or on the provision of immediate compared with medium-to longer-term supports? What does person-centered and family-centered grief support really look like? What does culturally sensitive practice really look like, whether that culture relates to particular response groups, families, ethnicity, sexuality or religion?

Importantly, the absence of these sorts of conceptualisations means that many people (at least in the Australian context) do not gain access to the resources relevant to these other dimensions – grief is seen as an individual, psychological experience and most resources are accessed by the adult (female) English-speaking population. With the absence of the integration of a social, cultural and spiritual framework, and without an analysis of power, intervention often remains at the level of the individual experience. An integrated framework requires consideration of the factors that shape this experience and, in turn, the required resources to provide effective grief support. It also demands measures that could prevent the circumstances that result in un-needed grief.

This perspective is illustrated through two examples of recent shifts in social attitudes and policies that implicitly recognise the multidimensional nature of grief and that help to acknowledge the grief that has been disenfranchised through damaging assumptions, attitudes and prejudices.

The first example is the Apology by the then Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, to the Stolen Generations in 2008. At this time the transgenerational grief and trauma experienced by Aboriginal Australians (HREOC, 1997; Bird, 1998; McKenzie & Thorpe, 1998) and their disenfranchised grief experience was officially acknowledged. We recognise that the Apology is only the beginning of a process to improve the situation of Aboriginal Australians, but it has highlighted the significance of symbolic reconciliation and acknowledgment of the pain and suffering of so many people throughout Australia’s history.
The second example is the policy change concerning the use of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) in Australia, abolished by the Rudd Labor Government in 2008. Under the previous federal government, refugees on Temporary Protection Visas had no travel rights; limited access to resettlement services, to English language programs, to employment and income assistance; and could not sponsor, or be reunited with, other family members. The Rudd Government recognised that the policy was a source of unnecessary grief and trauma and by abolishing the TPVs, enfranchised and provided hope for these refugees.

Concluding Thoughts

The issues we have identified encourage us to continue to question how we can be more open to the rights and needs of grieving people. In expanding our theoretical and research focus, what would or could happen differently? This matters because we are encouraged to rethink and recognise grief experiences of disenfranchised people and communities, leading to very different acknowledgements of social responsibility. We do not underestimate the complexities of the challenge. But we believe it is imperative to move from positions of prejudice and inappropriate uses of power to a position of shared power and meanings, to justice and awareness. Such an approach will hopefully foster a better understanding of how we each grieve in our particular social, cultural, spiritual and political contexts.

References


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