

Counsellors' Reflections on Disenfranchised Grief

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Abstract

In this exploratory, qualitative study, six counsellors were interviewed about their understandings of the concept of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002) and perspectives on their work with clients who had experienced non-death-related losses. Further aims were to explore the extent to which counsellors' own beliefs, values, and personal experiences of loss influenced this work and to gain an understanding of the ways in which practitioners may be affected when working with those who grieve. Key findings suggest that both personal experiences of loss and understandings of grief models influence counsellors' work with their clients. The practitioners who were interviewed varied in their knowledge about the concept of disenfranchised grief. Their own personal experiences of loss influenced their practice. The complex nature of grieving processes was confirmed, as well as the multifaceted impact on counsellors of working with loss and grief. The implications for counsellors' professional development and support are considered.

Keywords: Counsellors' experiences, disenfranchised grief, non-mortal loss, counsellor knowledge, counselling practice

Grief has been traditionally associated with bereavement (that is, loss by death) and theories of grief have developed from that perspective. However, everyone experiences losses in a multitude of ways, as they are an inevitable part of life, and when this happens grieving is a normal, healthy response. For many, losses are accommodated as part of life through personal resources and informal support (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004) so that the bereaved, or those experiencing other forms of loss, do not meet with counsellors in most situations (Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay, & van Dyke Stringer, 2010). Yet, for those who do seek formal support, therapy can be vital.

My interest in this area of work arose when changes in our family circumstances

caused me to experience significant grief. However, as the loss was considered a life transition, I found that social supports were unavailable and that the pain of my experience was discounted or minimised by others. When reaction to loss is invisible, discounted, or disowned, it is considered “disenfranchised”—a form of grief identified by Doka (1989, 2002). It has been shown that when loss is socially invalidated, it is more difficult to grieve (Attig, 2004; Doka, 2002) yet this invalidation also intensifies the feelings associated with grief (Livingston, 2010) as normal supports are denied. In these circumstances the role of a counsellor can be crucial in providing acknowledgement, validation, and support.

For many counsellors, working with those who grieve is considered profoundly meaningful; however, this work can also be challenging and emotionally demanding (Becvar, 2003). This article explores key concepts in the field of loss and grief, with particular reference to disenfranchised grief and current research, then describes the results of a small-scale investigation into influences on counsellors when working with clients who are grieving non-mortal losses, including the ways in which practitioners themselves are affected by this work.

Literature review

Defining disenfranchised grief

Doka (1989) proposed the concept of disenfranchised grief as “the grief persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported” (p. 4). He identified five broad categories of loss that are disenfranchised and that affect processes of grieving:

When the types of losses sustained are not perceived as important by the wider community

When the type of loss is unacknowledged or stigmatized

When particular individuals are not seen as entitled to grieve

When the circumstances of the death are denied

When the expression of grief is negatively judged. (Doka, 1989, 2002)

Loss and grief are embedded within a social framework (Attig, 1996; Doka, 2002) and cultural and grieving norms profoundly shape the ways in which loss is defined and expressed (Brabant, 2002; Doka, 2002). Socially unsanctioned loss is seen as reflective of an empathetic, social, political, and ethical failure to acknowledge the experiences of the bereaved. This invisibilising or discounting by society of certain kinds

of losses, expressions of grief, or griever's can be viewed as an abuse of power, as every individual has a right to grieve (Attig, 2004). On the other hand, individuals themselves may deny their own experience of loss and its effects. Self-disenfranchisement occurs when individuals fail to acknowledge their own suffering and consciously or unconsciously disconnect from the reality of the loss (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002) or deny the value of the loss and therefore the validity of their grief (Kauffman, 2002).

Experiences of loss

Whenever there is change in one's life, there is the capacity for loss and for gain (Neimeyer, 2001). Throughout life, loss is inevitable: part of the human experience is the loss of loved ones, precious objects, ideals, hopes and dreams, and more, as change occurs throughout the lifespan. Traditionally, great attention has been paid by researchers and commentators to death-related losses, and theories of loss and grief have developed primarily in relation to bereavement. Recently, understandings of processes of grieving have developed to include other forms of loss—non-mortal losses—as these are now more widely acknowledged as evoking significant grief (see, for example, Roos, 2002).

Loss and grief

Since the latter part of the twentieth century, grief has been understood from Western theoretical perspectives as a series of stages or tasks of mourning in response to loss (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 1982). However, research over the past two decades suggests that these concepts are deeply inadequate and the discussion of grief now recognises the highly complex, multilayered, ongoing, and holistic phenomena that occur when individuals grieve.

Neimeyer (2000) has applied a constructivist perspective to understanding processes of grieving—that is, the experience of grief is a constructed event and such a loss occurs in a world in which people make meaning of their lived realities. The search for meaning after loss may call individuals to question assumptions they held about their world as they attempt to assimilate the loss into their pre-loss beliefs. Murphy, Johnson, and Lohan (2003) have suggested that meaning can be made in two ways: first, cognitively, in questioning beliefs about self and the world, and second, existentially, by finding significance and purpose in life. The bereaved can rethink and reassess their understanding of the world. If meaning after loss cannot be found, individuals try to accommodate the loss by renegotiating their beliefs about the world (Neimeyer, 2000).

Just as grieving may validate or challenge assumptions about the world, grief may also call into question an individual's sense of self and result in a changed personal identity. As individuals adapt and learn to live with loss, their perceptions of self and others change in the context of loss (Neimeyer, 2000; Neimeyer, Prigerson & Davies, 2002). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2002) found that individuals who experienced loss had an increased sense of vulnerability but also saw themselves in a stronger, more resilient way. Although the processes of grief and the meanings attached to loss are personal, a commonly shared experience is an altered sense of self in the wake of loss (Corr, 2002).

While an individual is changed by loss, the relationship with the loss is also transformed. Adaptation to loss involves a continuing dynamic relationship with the loss that evolves over time (Attig, 1996; Klass, 2006). Just as it is within the web of their social relationships that individuals find meaning, so too it is within a network of connectedness, with self and others, that individuals "relearn" their world after loss (Attig, 1996, 2004). As loss and grief affect every dimension of a person's being, so those who grieve relearn the world in all aspects of their lives—cognitively, behaviourally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically (Attig, 1996).

It has been proposed that one way to relearn the world while integrating the impact of loss is to engage in an active process of adaptive ongoing coping, whereby an individual will focus on the loss itself, then also experience respite from the effect of change. As they learn to live in a new way after loss, individuals tend to oscillate between loss-orientated stressors and future-focused stressors (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). This oscillation, depicted in Stroebe and Schut's dual-process model of grief, is an essential dynamic in the multifaceted processes of adjustment to loss. However, research has found that while there is a common dimension to the expression of grief after loss, the bereaved and those who have experienced non-mortal losses re-engage in their world after loss in more individualistic ways (Carr, 2010).

Counsellor perspectives

The central significance of the therapeutic relationship in counselling effectiveness has been widely acknowledged (e.g., Pratt, 2007) and its reciprocal nature can be intensely profound and poignant for practitioners and clients alike (Kottler, 2003). The work invites counsellors into a relationship of commitment and caring (Becvar, 2003) so that their personal and professional identities can be changed by the stories they hear (Kottler, 2003). Working with a distressed client can be both beneficial and harmful for practitioners; while it can evoke personal growth and deepen their empathetic

understanding, research also indicates that counsellors can be at risk of secondary traumatic stress due to the demands of their work (Tehrani, 2010).

Self-awareness regarding personal beliefs and values is integral to counsellors' professional effectiveness (Kottler, 2003). Self-awareness, supervision and reflective practice are also mediating factors against work stress and can transform the negative effects of traumatic exposure into opportunities for learning, enhanced self-awareness, and growing resilience (Tehrani, 2010). Supervision and reflective practice provide counsellors with opportunities not only to develop professionally but also to deepen their understandings about how their personal and professional lives intertwine (Tehrani, 2010). Supervision is seen as a collaborative process to elicit personal agency for supervisees to increase their skill base and to deepen reflection on their therapeutic relationships as a way to maintain the standard of their professional work and to ensure counsellor self-care (Edwards & Chen, 1999).

Research indicates that counsellors' personal experiences of grief are a key resource that influences their facilitation of therapeutic processes (Dunphy & Schniering, 2009). Kottler (2003) suggested that practitioners may be more influenced by personal experiences than by theoretical models: it is the person of the counsellor who meets as a professional with a client. Yet balance between a counsellor's personal and professional lives is seen as extremely important (Becvar, 2003).

Method

The purpose of this small qualitative study was, therefore, to investigate counsellors' perspectives on their work with clients experiencing non-mortal and potentially disenfranchised losses. The research project endeavoured to explore counsellors' understandings of the concept of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002) through the stories they told about themselves and their work, and what influenced their work, particularly the effects of their personal experiences of grief on their practice. The researcher sought to contextualise truth by seeking knowledge from within the stories that participants told, identifying common themes and presenting the findings in a new way (Sanders & Wilkins, 2010) that was nevertheless grounded in their accounts of their experiences.

Participants

Six women aged between 30 and 69 years were interviewed. All had practised as professional counsellors in a major urban area in New Zealand for between 5 and 20 years; the average time they had spent in professional practice was 11.8 years. One

interviewee described herself as “semi-retired,” having recently resigned from full membership of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC). Three participants held full membership of the NZAC, while another had provisional membership, and one participant was a member of the New Zealand Christian Counsellors Association. Most participants identified as European, with one participant identifying as NZ European/Māori.

Procedure

The interview guide was developed on the basis of a review of literature on theoretical understandings of grief and loss and on research into the ways in which counsellors are affected by their work with clients. Permission to undertake the study was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited from advertisements in a local NZAC newsletter and from within a counsellor education programme.

All prospective participants were sent a Participant Information Pack that explained the purpose of the study, stipulated what was being asked of them, including the time commitment, and explained steps that would be taken to ensure the confidentiality of personal information and the secure storage of data gathered. In the individual interviews that followed, participants discussed their experiences of working with clients who grieve, particularly those experiencing non-mortal losses when their grief had been invalidated or unsupported by others. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for focus yet flexibility in the unique nature of the conversation that developed with each person (Sanders & Wilkins, 2010). Each interview was audio-recorded and the data transcribed. Participants chose pseudonyms for use in the research report.

Data analysis

To make sense of the unstructured data, a constructivist grounded theory approach was used—a method that ensured that any conclusions drawn were grounded in the data presented by participants—yet with the understanding that knowledge is co-created between participant and researcher (McLeod, 1999). Systematic analysis of data by the coding of transcripts enabled common themes to develop. Throughout the process, comparisons were made among participants’ stories in order to fully explore the complexities of the information they provided. As a way of corroborating the trustworthiness of the data, the coding of the transcripts and key findings were reviewed by the research supervisor (Sanders & Wilkins, 2010).

Results

Four key themes emerged from the research. The first was that the interviewees had only partial understandings of the concept of disenfranchised grief. Second, counsellors' own personal beliefs and experiences of loss influenced the shaping of their theoretical understandings as well as the strategies they used when working with the bereaved. Third, the highly complex nature of grief was also confirmed, as well as the fourth and related finding, the notable impact of working with loss and grief on practitioners, both personally and professionally. Self-care and supervision were therefore viewed as valuable. In reporting the results here, pseudonyms that the participants themselves chose have been used.

Disenfranchised grief

All participants indicated clear understandings of grieving processes although some did not make the distinction between grief that is disenfranchised and other kinds of grief. Sally said: "In my own practice, I probably wouldn't really say I'm familiar with the word disenfranchised; we don't name it as disenfranchised grief. I would just kind of name it, as really, loss and grief."

Other participants saw disenfranchised grief as not normally recognised grief. Sarah commented that it was a grief not easily talked about: "Well, it's a newish phrase to me in recent years and my understanding, if correct, is that it's where there hasn't been a death as such but there is still significant loss and grief. It's also grief that's not acknowledged easily, it's something you cannot talk about easily because it's not the normal recognised grief."

Participants reported that their clients had experienced non-mortal losses that were not fully understood by others, such as car accidents, illnesses, dementia, divorce, and family separation. They understood disenfranchised grief primarily as grief that is not publicly validated or is misunderstood by others, rather than incorporating the full extent of the concept of disenfranchised grief. Jenny said in a hesitant way: "My understanding is probably very simple...um...it's more a grief that's not, is not publicly acknowledged...so people are, um, are carrying grief and they are hurt...but feel very much like people don't understand what they're going through...am I on the right track?" Pam, however, related disenfranchised grief to shame: "It's grief where it's shaped by an idea that it's not validated, or that someone...should be over it already, or the loss is not important...there's elements of shame that are part of the experience."

Parnell also talked of the impact of shame when the experience of grief was not understood or validated: “Well, shame in that sense in terms of grief, is toxic...the whole complex of being excluded from understanding, which is so toxic.” Only one participant, Jenny, differentiated between self-disenfranchisement and socially constructed disenfranchisement of grief: “For some people, well, they actually hold it as private...so their processing is very private and they don’t actually share with other people what they are going through...but for other people there is just no awareness of their emotions.”

Influences on the work

Although it is recognised that there are myriad influences on counsellors when they meet with their clients, the research explored three key areas of influence: personal experiences of loss; understanding of theoretical models, and personal values and beliefs. All participants spoke of the significant impact of personal experiences of grief on their professional practice. Pam talked about the ways in which her experiences of grief increased her sensitivity and empathy for clients. “It’s allowed me to have a deeper empathy...you know my life journey has its losses along the way...it enables me to be more effective than I would be if I hadn’t had experiences of loss.” Jenny also spoke about empathy for clients: “I mean I’ve sat in their chair...the total aloneness at times...I find that it actually helps me empathise in a way that leads the work into a positive way.”

Personal experiences of grief also played a significant part in shaping counsellors’ theoretical understandings of loss and grief. Pam, for example, talked of having to stretch the theory to fit her experience when she was given stage-based resources. “I remember having a period of grief, after a trauma actually, that involved loss and being given a list of stages of grief, and just kind of, it was a stretch to fit with what was going on for me...I was feeling like I should be somewhere different.”

The second influence on counselling practice that emerged was the value of theoretical understandings underpinning the counsellors’ work. One dominant theoretical model mentioned was Robert Neimeyer’s social constructivist perspective. Pam commented: “There’s real value in acknowledging finding the meaning within the grief experience...I find it fits with my understanding, in that it makes sense in it, in a way that feels healthy.” Jenny also spoke about the importance of making meaning: “Bob Neimeyer’s theory on making meaning out of the grief is an underlying theory that I work from...a client comes to the point of finding a journey towards hope...that’s the reconstruction of meaning. They start to find hope.”

Sally found that narrative therapy informed her work and she especially liked the ideas, which she attributed to that approach, of multiple realities and hope and loss sitting together within the grief experience. "The fact that you can talk about hope, but you can talk about loss at the same time; it almost makes space for people to talk about the loss...I think it makes it really a balance." She went on to say: "Most of us have a strong preference for the restorative narrative in grief...we have a tendency to filter out loss, and despair, and hopelessness.... I think about what's your relationship...what kind of relationship do you want to have with grief?"

Participants discussed the idea of stages in the grieving process. There was a language of moving through grief. Sarah said: "Loss and grief are part of life and it's a process to work through." Another participant commented: "It's the role of the therapist to help the person...work it through, even if the stages are slow." However, just as Pam had found when grieving her own loss, Sally reported that the stages of grief do not fit with people's experiences: "I think there's some kind of idea out there about what's the proper way to deal with grief...its...strongly influenced by the ideas of Kübler-Ross...but those kinds of ideas I think, I think people don't experience [that]...it's often problematic, cos it doesn't actually fit with their experiences."

Personal values and beliefs were also seen as a significant influence on therapeutic work. Pam spoke of her belief in people's inner strength and wisdom, and their connection to a higher power: "I personally believe in the, everybody's inner strength and inner wisdom...trying to listen for people's little inner wise voice, yeah and for me that's connected to a higher power as well...so it comes in to the way I work...you're mining for gold." Parnell spoke about her personal belief in the power of healing, and the therapeutic power of this belief in healing: "The way I work is that I believe in healing and whatever heals I would support...so the implications for the therapist are if we believe in healing then we find a way of healing." Sarah had a belief in respecting each person's capacity to grow through grief, and said thoughtfully: "My personal values are that every person is an individual and needs respect and valuing their particular belief systems...and for me working hard not to be judgemental of people, respect is really important, and perhaps also believing in the ability of each person to work through significant loss and grief. So that's an important value."

The complexity of grief

The third key finding from the research was the complex nature of grief, which required sensitive and keenly attuned therapeutic engagement. Participants viewed the

journey of grief as multifaceted, multilayered, and ongoing. Pam acknowledged: “I’m working with a client at the moment who has disenfranchised grief, and there seem to be just more and more layers that come up...it’s like when the top layer is kind of lifted...then there’s other things that are part of that load of grief that is being carried.” Jenny talked about grief as a journey that doesn’t take a straight course: “So you have to be very patient to—um—match the client’s pace, but not pace it so slow that there is no movement, so balance...I guess it’s—a journey that doesn’t take a straight course, and so that you have to allow for the forwards and the backwards but you don’t allow them to step backwards so far that you’re not actually being helpful to them.”

One participant commented on loss affecting the whole person: “It’s a kind of loss on every single level...loss of hopes and dreams, loss of ideas about what’s normal and what’s not normal. Loss of what you can expect in life.” Sally spoke about the highly delicate and skilful nature of being aware of the pacing of the work. “It’s a balance...sitting with a person and where they are...how much do you sit there...do you stay there, when do you push a bit harder, when do you push back? It’s not just sitting there, it’s an active, it’s an active process...that to me is a challenge...I think it’s very skilful very, very skilful...it’s very different for different people.”

Impact of the work

All participants spoke about the effect of working as a counsellor as both a privilege and a challenge. Sally spoke strongly about the impact of the work: “I think it’s a complete myth that your work doesn’t impact on you personally. And it’s the same, I think it’s a complete myth that your personal life doesn’t impact on your work.” Talking about her work, Pam said: “It adds such a value to life generally; it’s really lovely to feel part of someone’s life in a brief way. You know you kind of get a window into someone else’s experience and soul, which is a real privilege.”

Parnell also used the metaphor of studying the human soul:

P: I mean where else can you study the human soul as well as people who open themselves to you?

R: How does that impact you?

P: I’m just hugely grateful. I mean I learn so much every day.

However, these counsellors acknowledged that therapeutic work challenged them at times. Sarah talked of her own disenfranchised grief being triggered in the work: “It can trigger my own experience of disenfranchised grief, so I’ve got to recognise that

on the one hand, it also gives the opportunity to have greater empathy and understanding...the insights are just that they would sort of trigger off other experiences.” Pam also talked about the challenging parts of the work in seeing others' suffering: “Sometimes it's really challenging to be triggered...I find it hard to see people suffering, suffering on and on and on, and let that go.” Sarah spoke of the emotional demands of the work: “You have to be careful not to take on too much in any one workload because it's emotionally draining assisting people to work through loss and grief...it also can take emotional energy...I can wake up in the night over it. So that's not such a good part of it.”

You can't do it without good self-care

Owing to the nature of the work, participants talked about the importance of self-care, which included balance in life, a faith to draw from, and the importance of supervision. Pam reflected: “It's a job where you're like...I can't do it without good self-care...I do more self-care, and more kind of consciously staying in touch with, maintaining relationships that fuel me, and doing things I love, which enriches my life anyway...choosing to live this way.” Sarah talked about self-care and balance: “Self-care is very important, and balancing the case load.” Jenny also saw balance as an essential element of her work: “There needs to be a personal balance in my life...if your balance gets out of whack and you're overtired or emotional, you know, you start to question the counsellor safety...”

Several participants talked about faith being a resource for them personally, and part of self-care. Pam commented, “My personal faith in God, or to some people that's a higher power, and the awareness that people do have resilience and the human spirit can recover from loss and grief.” Sally said: “Certainly my relationship with God—that I can often talk to God, and say, God [laughter] why, like what's going on here?”

Self-care also encompassed more formalised strategies. For example, Jenny talked about the importance of writing up notes: “Writing my notes helps bring closure to that particular session...it helps me personally debrief.”

All participants talked about the importance of supervision as a way to understand how the manner in which they worked was impacted by the work itself. For Sarah, having a good supervisor was very important: “I just couldn't do this work without a good supervisor who understood the dynamics of my practice.” Supervision was also a place to offload with someone who was there for the counsellor. Rocksolid commented: “I've got a great supervisor. I would be ready for supervision and go in

full and empty it out!” It was also described as a mirroring process by Parnell: “It’s very very important as a mirroring process... I’m there for the client. I need someone there for me too.”

Discussion

The results of this study are essentially a snapshot of the perspectives of a small group of counsellors, as only six self-selected participants were interviewed. It would be inappropriate to generalise from such a small sample, and the results need to be interpreted cautiously. However, an interesting finding is the participants’ limited familiarity with the concept of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002) because it could be inferred that the counsellors who volunteered to take part did so out of an interest in the area of loss and grief. This may have implications for counsellor education and professional development.

Disenfranchised grief

In many ways, individuals can be silenced by their experiences of grief, particularly with regard to non-death-related losses. All the counsellors in this study associated disenfranchised grief primarily with losses that were not seen as important by the client’s usual support system. However, the concept of disenfranchised grief is more inclusive and the participants seemed to lack awareness of the extent to which, and the ways in which, particular losses and the associated grief could be disenfranchised. Many non-death-related losses are relatively invisible or private, with no socially constructed or available means of acknowledging the loss and the associated grief (Roos, 2002). At times, the circumstances of a death can be refuted or stigmatised and individuals are thereby denied the right to grieve (Doka, 1989, 2002). Particular expressions of grief can also be judged and deemed inappropriate by others. Given the potential for grief to be disenfranchised, and the partial understandings of the concept that counsellors described in this study, a need for further professional development in this area seems to be indicated. Further discussion about the potential for grief to be disenfranchised and education to provide a broader understanding of the concept could heighten practitioners’ awareness of some complex dimensions of loss and grief.

Influences on counsellors

The pertinent and reciprocal nature of the therapeutic relationship was spoken about by all participants, who reiterated Kottler’s (2003) view that in the work, “each changes

the other” (p. 1). Participants were aware of the value of their own personal experiences of loss and the ways in which these informed their practice with increased sensitivity and deeper empathy with their clients. Kottler (2003) has suggested that personal experiences are more influential than theory in clinical work. However, it has also been acknowledged that theoretical understandings influence work with clients who experience loss (Dunphy & Schniering, 2009). The current research suggests that personal experiences of grief might have been significant for these counsellors in shaping theoretical underpinnings as well as strategies employed in clinical practice. These experiences led not only to an increase in empathetic skills, but also a “knowing” at a deeper, experiential level that then informed their professional work.

In the current study, values, beliefs, and personal experiences all influenced participants' assessment and adoption of theoretical models, as all practitioners acknowledged that their personal values and beliefs influenced their professional work. Although theoretical models informed counsellors about the dynamics of grief and loss, at times this knowledge did not fit with the counsellors' own experience of grief, which in turn influenced their evaluation of the models.

It is interesting to note that three theoretical models were discussed by participants: a social constructivist perspective (Neimeyer, 2000); narrative therapy (Sliedrecht & Kotzé, 2008), and stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969). However, other significant contributions, such as the Dual Process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), Attig's (1996) concept of relearning the world, and Klass' (2006) emphasis on the idea of the continuing relationship with loss and continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996), were not mentioned.

There was disagreement among participants about the significance of the ideas of stages of grief: some counsellors referred to helping clients “work through” grief and were using the Kübler-Ross model to explain the processes of grief, while others saw this model as significantly outdated. More recent writers have discredited its validity and relevance and have widely disproven the “staged” concept of grief (Attig, 1996; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Neimeyer, 2000; Sliedrecht & Kotzé, 2008). This indicates the need for further professional development in this area to introduce practitioners to wider and more contemporary understandings of loss and grief.

The complexity of grief

This study confirmed the highly complex nature of grief (Neimeyer et al., 2002; Stroebe & Schut, 1999), as participants talked about working with clients who experience ongoing, multilayered grief. It is valuable for counsellors to view the experience of grief

and loss broadly and in holistic ways to incorporate the complex nature of relationships with self, and with losses and their effects within a social context.

Another interesting finding illuminated the “gold within the darkness,” the interweaving of hope and loss. Several participants talked about the balance in the work, holding both the reality of clients’ hope and their despair in grieving. This suggests the delicate balances involved in working with those who grieve in order to story and validate the loss and, with sensitive timing, invite hope to be present in the counselling conversation. The importance of clients’ experiences being storied, heard and validated was acknowledged by participants. As clients’ experiences were shared, the counsellors reported that their clients found a deeper understanding of their losses (Klass, 2006; Neimeyer, 2000).

Impact of the work

The counsellors who were interviewed spoke about the profound influence of working with loss and grief on their lives, personally and professionally, and acknowledged the huge privilege it is to work with their clients. The nature of their therapeutic relationships impacted upon these practitioners beyond the counselling room. While some participants saw their counselling career as a lifestyle choice, yet there was also an awareness of a cost to this intense work, which reflects current thinking. As Kottler (2003) has written, “Most therapists understand that they jeopardize their own emotional well-being when they intimately encounter the pain of others” (p. 1). Participants in the current study acknowledged the impact of the work and reported feeling emotionally exhausted at times.

A high standard of self-care is therefore seen as essential. Some counsellors viewed self-care from a holistic perspective that included lifestyle balance, a faith belief, and supportive relationships. Participants also affirmed that formal strategies such as supervision and writing up notes were vital in good self-care. They found supervision helpful in two ways: first, to provide a mirror to encourage insight and self-reflection, and second, to develop counselling skills.

Conclusion

In this study, the semi-structured nature of the interviews provided rich data. However, knowledge is co-created (McLeod, 1999) and it needs to be recognised that the subjective and personal nature of the data elicited and analysed has influenced the research outcomes (Sanders & Wilkins, 2010).

This research began from personal motivation to understand the dynamics of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002) with regard to non-mortal loss, as disenfranchised grief is a relatively new concept in the field of thanatology, and to make more visible a concept that may be invisible to others because grief has traditionally been associated with bereavement. While results indicated that participants had a developed understanding of the theoretical models that underpinned their grief and loss work, there was less awareness shown of the full extent of disenfranchised grief. An ongoing conversation about disenfranchised grief will continue to highlight and increase awareness in this area. It seems that it would also be valuable to provide opportunities for practitioners to widen their knowledge of other contemporary contributions to theories of loss and grief as well.

Further investigation to explore the connection between personal experiences of grief, understandings of grief models, and strategies used in the counselling room would provide additional information about how their professional role and personal experiences influence practitioners. It may be helpful in the future to explore more fully the strategies that counsellors use when working with clients, particularly the ways in which they sit with uncertainty in the experience of grief, and how they open spaces in their counselling conversations that invite both loss and hope to be present.

The challenging aspects of grief and loss work were discussed in this study as it is recognised that grief counselling is emotionally demanding (Becvar, 2003). A more extensive investigation into the impact of working with those who grieve would provide additional clarity about the benefits and the potentially harmful aspects of grief work.

Although loss, limitation, and change are an inevitable part of life, when loss is minimised or stigmatised, individuals are denied the right to grieve (Attig, 2004). As counsellors who may meet with the marginalised, it is important that the discussions about the nature of loss and grief theory continue to broaden and acknowledge those who have been silenced in their experiences of grief.

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