

Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate how death and grief are constructed in relationship and how the experience of grief is affected by participation in remembering conversations that occur in a time-limited support group setting. It also outlines the assumptions behind remembering conversations and details the kinds of questioning on which they are built. Remembering conversations seek to keep those who have died alive in the stories that continue to be told of them long after they have died. They build on the metaphor of a membership club, to which the dead need to be reincorporated. Particular attention was paid to noticing differences in grief experiences after a person had attended a six-week support group that was facilitated using narratively shaped exercises and conversations. The author designed the support group series and facilitated many of the groups that took place between January 2006 and June 2007. Six women participated in extensive interviews between December 2007 and February 2008 and four of their interviews are presented and analyzed in-depth in this research. Each story represents difference in the caliber of relationship with the person who had died. The causes of death for the deceased loved ones were also markedly different. These differences provided opportunity to explore the robustness of remembering conversations with a range of grief experiences.

In order to establish the context for remembering conversations as a departure from conventional modernist grief psychology this study traces some of the history of the ways in which death and grief have been constructed by modern influences. In particular the lack of focus on the relationship between the bereaved and their dead loved ones is identified as a repeated tendency in grief psychology from Freud to the present day. This historical account next contextualizes remembering conversations as founded on social constructionist and postmodern principles. Understanding the theories and practices that have been employed by bereavement counseling alerts readers to the gross and subtle differences in how grief is thought of.

The data is analyzed using a hybrid methodology that incorporates some elements of grounded theory alongside elements of ethnographic research and narrative inquiry to explore new ideas about practice. Ultimately the most useful methodology has been the

application of narrative inquiry to create structure for retrospective meaning-making. The aim was to understand in detail how remembering conversations could actively engage the bereaved in the development of a storied connection with the deceased and identify some of the benefits from doing so. In the analysis of the data these benefits are organized into three tiers. First, the effects of the group upon participants are detailed. I show how their description of their experience of grief changed after attending the narrative bereavement groups. Participants enjoyed remembering and experienced shifts in their thinking. Their lives, and consequently their grief, were made easier as a result of remembering conversations. Secondly, the study explains how the changes were of therapeutic benefit. Focusing on what remains, rather than only what is lost when a person dies, has a therapeutic effect because it re-establishes a storied connection to those who have passed. This impact shifts the emphasis in standard bereavement counseling on separating from the lost relationship upside down and brings a fresh perspective to the thanatology field by emphasizing the construction of life-affirming relational stories.

In the third tier of analysis, the data is connected to the theoretical assumptions of remembering practices. This final tier further contrasts the dominant conventional approach with that of a social constructionist approach to grief. It asserts a relational rather than an individualistic approach to grief counseling and avoids a backward-looking focus on the past in favor of the reinvigoration of the present and the future. Rather than requiring the bereaved to say goodbye to deceased loved ones, this approach encourages the bereaved to stay connected to the deceased through stories and to actively remember them. Stories are selected by the bereaved to draw on the most helpful aspects of relationship.

The data will show how this approach encourages the bereaved to find a place for the ongoing introduction and incorporation of the dead into new relationships rather than consigning them to silence in the past. This practice gives the voice of the dead a chance to continue to reverberate in the stories that are told about them. Finally, it ensures that the story of grief does not remain in the singular story of loss but is opened up to a rich world of multiple stories.