New understandings of parental grief: literature review

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Background. Health professionals have a critical role in supporting bereaved parents and rely on models of grief to inform and guide their practice. However, different models, based on fundamentally different theoretical perspectives and research paradigms, do not necessarily reflect the experiences, or particular needs, of bereaved parents.

Aim. The aim of this paper is to report a literature review exploring changing theoretical perspectives in relation to parental grief in the United Kingdom and United States of America.

Methods. A literature search was conducted of nursing, medical and social science data bases using the key words bereaved parents, models of grief and theories of grief. This revealed 266 publications, of which 32 were relevant. Contemporary literature has formed the focus of this review but older material has been included to trace how theoretical perspectives on parental grief have evolved over time.

Findings. Theoretical perspectives, on which models of grief are based, have evolved continuously over the last century. Also, traditional and new models differ because in that they are rooted in positivistic and non-positivistic research paradigms respectively. The main implications for health professionals are that new models can be applied in practice to support parents in their grief. The literature reflects an Anglo-American cultural perspective and further research is needed to reflect the multicultural diversity of today’s multicultural societies.

Conclusions. This review highlights fundamental differences between traditional and new models of grief. Traditional models, place emphasis on bereaved people letting go of their emotional relationships with those who have died. In contrast, new models, place emphasis on parents holding on to their relationship with their dead children, and identify therapeutic interventions that support parents in their grief.

Keywords: parental grief, models of grief, therapeutic interventions, nursing

Introduction

The work presented is based on a review of the literature on changing theoretical perspectives in relation to parental grief in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA). This formed the background to an empirical study of the experiences of parents who had suffered the loss of a child with a life-limiting condition such as cancer, severe cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy (Davies 2002).

Parental grief has been recognized as the most intense and overwhelming of all griefs (Rando 1986, Rees 1997). The loss of a child impacts not only upon the individual parent but the parent dyad, family system and society itself (Rando 1986, Riches & Dawson 2000). From a historical perspective (Walter 1999), the 20th century is the first in UK and USA society in which a typical death is not that of a child. Thus, comparatively few people today experience the death of a child within their own family or community. Such a death is
Integrative literature reviews and meta-analyses

Parental grief

regarded as against the natural order of things in a society where it is assumed that parents die before their children. Even health care professionals directly involved with caring for dying children regard such deaths as unnatural (Papadatou 1997) and may inadvertently overlook, underestimate or misinterpret the needs of bereaved parents (Neidig & Dalgas-Pelish 1991). From the 1980s onward there has been increasing recognition by those who work with bereaved parents that traditional theoretical perspectives which have dominated practice over the last century do not reflect the unique experiences of parental grief. In response, new ones based on actual studies of bereaved parents have evolved. These offer new understandings about the phenomenon of bereavement and identify therapeutic interventions that support bereaved parents.

Review Methods

Aim

The aim of this review was to trace how theoretical perspectives on parental grief have changed over the last century and show how these influence therapeutic interventions with bereaved parents. The literature was reviewed chronologically to demonstrate how the zeitgeist, or spirit of the age, has influenced these changes.

Search strategy

The search strategy included three electronic databases Medline, CINAHL and ClinPSYC, identifying literature published between 1916 and 2003, 1982 and 2003 and 1982 and 2003, respectively. Key terms used were ‘bereaved parents’, ‘models of grief’ and ‘theories of grief’. This was extended by scrutinizing the reference lists of publications to identify key texts and authors. This yielded 266 publications, including key papers identified from 1917 onwards sourced by the British Library, of which 32 were considered relevant to the review. It should be emphasized that this is not a systematic review; rather literature has been chosen relevant to the area of enquiry and to highlight the shift from traditional to new models of grief.

Findings

It is first necessary to set out working definitions of the terms employed in the discussion that follows. There is a broad consensus within the literature that grief is an emotional response to loss, whilst bereavement is the situation of having lost someone significant (Hindmarch 1993, Stroebe et al. 1997). Likewise, mourning consists of the actions and manners expressed in grief that reflect the cultural practices of the bereaved (Parkes et al. 1997, Walter 1999). Models may be defined as overall frameworks on how we look at a phenomenon in reality (Silverman 1997) or as intellectual schemata (Silverman & Klass 1996). As Tomey and Alligood (2002) have noted, a model enables a systematic approach to the phenomena with which the discipline is concerned, whilst the theories that derive from the concepts within this can also propose actions to guide practice. In this respect, as Tadd and Chadwick (1989) have observed, a concept may be defined as an image of reality tinted with the theorist’s perception, experience or philosophical bent. Different models or understandings reflect different theoretical perspectives derived from the academic discipline with which the theorist is associated. Thus, traditional perspectives on grief are rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition of Freud (Lindemann 1944, Bowlby & Parkes 1970), whilst new ones include ethno- graphic (Klass 1993a, 1993b, Klass 1996, Klass 1999) and sociological approaches (Walter 1996, 1999, Riches & Dawson 2000). These will now be set out in chronological order, for, as Silverman and Klass (1996) have emphasized and will become apparent later, models not only represent intellectual schemata but also form part of the Zeitgeist, or spirit, of the particular age in which they were constructed.

Traditional perspectives on grief

Concepts of grief work

The study of grief began with Freud, who has been credited with establishing a 20th century psychology of grief (Walter 1994). In 1917, Freud developed the concept of grief work. This is based on the premise that ‘mourning has quite a precise task to perform; its function is to detach survivors’ memories and hopes from the dead’ (Freud, 1961a, p. 253).

Although never conceptually defined (Stroebe & Stroebe 1997), it implies a cognitive process whereby bereaved people confront the reality of loss through reviewing their past and, in doing so, work towards detachment from the person who has died. Thus, successful grief work is accomplished when a bereaved individual is able to withdraw attachments from the deceased and live contentedly in a restructured lifestyle (Rando 1986, Rees 1997, Stroebe & Stroebe 1997). However, Freud’s theoretical model did not match his personal experience of bereavement through the loss of his daughter Sophie, which he described nine years later in a letter of condolence to a friend whose son had recently died:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will
never fill a gap. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. Actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not wish to relinquish (1961a, p. 239).

Even so, Freud’s concept of grief work continued to be the dominant theme in theoretical models that followed. Lindemann, another psychoanalyst, reinforced this in his seminal work setting out the characteristics of normal, as well as abnormal, grief, which he referred to as morbid or unresolved grief. Like his predecessor, his work was carried out against the backdrop of another world war, and he was probably all too aware of the tendency to refrain from or delay grief in a society whose focus had to be on survival. Reflecting the psychoanalytic approach, grief work with bereaved people was aimed at conscious expression of feelings and confronting the reality of loss. The goal of this therapeutic intervention was successful resolution of grief. This, as Lindemann (1944, p. 43) described, meant ‘emancipation from the bondage of the deceased. Readjustment to the environment and the formation of new relationships.’

The limitations of Lindemann’s study on which these concepts were based needs to be considered. The sample was not representative of the general population, and the interviews carried out with 101 bereaved adults included those whose relatives had died in hospital, as well as a group described as psychoneurotic who had lost relatives during a course of medical treatment. The sample also included relatives who had experienced the loss of a young person in a fire at the Coconut Grove Nightclub, Boston in 1942 in which 168 people died. Another distinct group included in this study were bereaved relatives of men who had served in the armed forces. Theorists (Middleton et al. 1997) have since drawn attention to the fact that some of these losses fall outside the normal experience of loss, and would now be defined as traumatic losses for which specific therapeutic interventions would be required to help resolve grief. Other limitations, highlighted most notably by Parkes (1996), are that no details were provided of the total number of interviews, length of bereavement or frequency of the characteristics Lindemann identified, such as preoccupation with image of the deceased. Nonetheless, as Worden (1991) has noted, the manifestations of normal grief that he described, such as feelings of sadness and anger, are those exhibited by bereaved people in his own practice today. It is Lindemann’s concept of morbid, or unresolved grief, that is pertinent here, for this centred on those who failed to achieve the final task of grief work, that is, breaking bonds with the deceased.

**Processes of grief**

Bowlby (1961), building on the concept of grief work initiated by Freud and Lindemann, developed a model that classified the stages of grief. Briefly, this originally comprised three stages or phases: yearning and searching; disorganization and despair; and a greater or lesser degree of reorganization. Collaborative work with Parkes (1970), led to a further stage, that is, numbness, being included. This was based on findings from their London study (Bowlby & Parkes 1970) of long clinical interviews with 22 widows aged between 26 and 65 years of age at 1, 3, 6, 9 and 12 months following bereavement. Their model of grief, known popularly as the grief process, had a major influence on health care professionals working with the bereaved.

Obvious parallels may be drawn between Bowlby and Parkes (1970) model of grief and Bowlby’s (1969, 1973, 1980) theory of attachment and loss that focused on separation of infants or young children from their mothers. Bowlby theorized that young children form an emotional bond to a mother-figure in the middle of their first year and that any rupture of this led to separation anxiety. He identified that young children, if separated, attempt to restore proximity to the mother-figure through a sequence of phases, namely protest and anger, despair and yearning, and emotional detachment as a coping mechanism, even if the mother-figure returns. Bowlby (1961) pointed out that these responses in infants and young children are substantially the same as those observed when an older child or adult loses a loved figure. In effect, the underlying processes in both were mourning and grief for the loss of a loved figure. Thus, in Bowlby’s view grief became conceptualized as a form of separation anxiety (Stroebe et al. 1996).

Bowlby and Parkes’ model of grief reflects the inner turmoil experienced by the bereaved individual (Rees 1997). Mourning usually begins with feelings of numbness as well as unreality and confusion. Once these subside the bereaved experiences intense yearning for the dead person, which is the emotional component of the urge to search for the lost loved figure (Rees 1997). Parkes (1970) considered this yearning or searching phase as an essential component of the grief process. The bereaved individual thinks intensely about the lost loved one and may focus on the place associated with them that suggests their presence. As Parkes noted, although a bereaved adult knows such behaviour will not result in reunion with the deceased, this urge to search is nevertheless a strong one. This component of the grief process seems at odds with Freud’s assertion (1961a) that the function of mourning is to detach the survivor’s memories and hopes from the deceased. Logically, no one can search for, and
simultaneously disengage from, another person. Parkes (1970) explained this paradox by pointing out that the bereaved unlearns their attachment to the deceased through undergoing these painful but essential experiences. Thus, the Bowlby–Parkes model follows the established psychoanalytic tradition established by Freud. Successful resolution of grief was acceptance of loss and detachment, that is, breaking or severing emotional bonds with the deceased.

Silverman and Klass (1996) have stated that those who follow the Bowlby–Parkes model define resolution of grief as severing bonds rather than establishing changed bonds with the deceased. Likewise, as Walter (1999) noted, it is from this model that a clinical lore developed amongst those working with the bereaved that all forms of mourning eventually lead towards detachment from the deceased.

**Tasks of mourning**

Worden’s (1982) equally influential model consisted of a series of four tasks the bereaved had to work through in order to come to terms with their loss. These were (1) accepting the reality of the loss, (2) working through the pain of grief, (3) adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing and lastly, and (4) withdrawing emotional energy and reinvesting in another relationship. Although not based on findings from an actual empirical study, Worden’s model drew on a body of existing bereavement literature as well as his own clinical practice as a grief counsellor and researcher. Rando (1986), whilst recognizing its relevance to conjugal grief, identified the limitations of its application to parental grief, some of which will be set out here. For example, task (1) of accepting the death of their child was identified as difficult because to parents this was against the law of nature; their child should have outlived them, not vice versa. Task (2) was identified as equally difficult because parents grieve not only for their child but for their lost future hopes and dreams. Task (3) again was no less difficult for, if there were surviving children, parents must continue with parenting and, unlike bereaved widows, there is no major role re-definition. The last task was seen as not only difficult but probably impossible. As Rando (1986) rightly identified, to parents their child is an extension of self and, unlike bereaved widows who can perhaps remarry and reinvest in another relationship, a child is irreplaceable.

**Need for new theoretical perspectives on parental grief**

As Rando (1986) had clearly identified, the traditional criteria for identifying unresolved or abnormal grief were in fact the normal components of parental grief. A new model was needed to take account of the intensity, as well as the special and unique features, surrounding the loss of a child. During the same period, Wortman and Silver (1989) challenged the prevalent orthodoxy of traditional concepts of grief, which they described as myths. From their review of the research, they concluded that it was not proven that grief work was essential to enable the bereaved to come to terms with their loss. They also identified three distinct patterns of grieving. Whilst one of these fitted the Bowlby–Parkes model, that is, the bereaved moving from high to low emotional distress over time, some people never experienced high distress, whilst others continued in high distress for years. In the same period, the written experiences of bereaved parents were becoming incorporated into the research literature, and these too challenged the claims of prevalent theoretical concepts and models. Parents themselves (Schatz 1986a, 1986b) reported a continuing need to share stories of their child’s life with other bereaved parents or professional carers. Parents also focused on the need for professional carers to recognize and understand the particular needs of bereaved parents. Against this background of dissent, it is perhaps not surprising that Worden (1991) made adaptations to his model to take account of these changing perspectives. In the second edition of his book, the role of counsellors was no longer to help the bereaved give up their relationship with the dead, but rather to find an appropriate place for the dead in their emotional lives. The stage was set for new theoretical perspectives to provide new understandings of parental grief.

**New theoretical perspectives on parental grief**

**Continuing bonds**

New theoretical perspectives reject the concept of breaking bonds with the deceased as a means of resolving grief that formed such an integral part of traditional models. Instead, based on actual studies of bereaved parents, they emphasize the concept of continuing bonds. Klass (1993a, 1993b), from his 10-year ethnographic study with a group of Compassionate Friends (a self-help group for bereaved parents), identified how parents maintained bonds with their dead children. Multiple data sources included interviews with parents, their own writings, newsletters and notes from meetings. These revealed that the dead children became central to the conversational life of parents in this group. Through sharing recollections and memories of their children, they were able to reconstruct their relationships with them within their inner and social worlds in a way that was meaningful to them. Parents kept a sense of their children intact through linking objects, e.g. the children’s possessions, as well as religious devotions (not necessarily conventional) or rituals that evoked memories of the children. For example, Klass (1993a) described how a bereaved mother retained her
daughter’s dress, whilst a father would not part with an old pick-up truck 5 years after his daughter’s death because he felt her sense of presence there. His (Klass 1999) subsequent work on the spiritual lives of bereaved parents based on 20 years of ethnographic research also identified the solace-giving experiences parents obtain through these continuing bonds with their dead children.

Findings from other qualitative studies also identify the phenomenon of continuing bonds. Talbot (2002), a bereaved mother herself, identified in her phenomenological study of 80 bereaved mothers that remembering and maintaining a connection with their dead children was a healing factor for many. Mothers in this study used a range of activities to preserve memories and bonds to their children. These included writing their children’s biographies, composing poetry, establishing monetary memorials, and rituals such as lighting candles or saying prayers. Rosenblatt (2000), in his narrative study of 58 bereaved parents (29 couples, or former couples), also found that they reported continuing connection to their child through talking about them to others in their social world and in actually talking to their dead child. These also reported keeping reminders of their children, such as, toys, photographs and clothing, in order to remain connected to the children.

Sociological perspectives on grief
Findings from Riches and Dawson’s (2000) study support both the claim that bereavement takes place in the social world of which the bereaved parents remain part and the concept of continuing bonds. Their ethnographic study of 50 bereaved parents and siblings, using in-depth interviews, enabled families to recount their feelings, thoughts and events following bereavement and their own perceptions of support from family, self-help groups and professionals. Findings focused on how parents make changes and adjustment as well as give meaning to their loss, and demonstrated that this is dependent on their relationship with self, partners, surviving children and the wider social world. Their findings mirror those of Klass, because sharing memories and exploring the significance of their children’s lives with others provided them with internal pictures of their children with which they could continue to relate. Parents (Riches & Dawson 1998) found solace through sensing their children’s presence and linking objects, which in this study were photographs. Parents also reported how their children continued to have an influence on their thoughts and feelings.

Exploring the significance of their children’s lives, as well as the continuing influence they have through continuing bonds, may be regarded as a positive means dealing with bereavement. Marwitt and Klass (1995) claim that dead people fulfil four important roles for the living: as a continuing role model, as someone with whom survivors may check out personal values and priorities, as a guide and mentor, and as a significant other whose views of the world and of the bereaved people continue to be an influence. For example, Klass (1996) gives an account of a father whose murdered daughter continued to have an influence on his life and prevented him, as a former alcoholic, returning to his addiction.

The continuing influence of the dead on the living is the essence of Walter’s (1996) biographical model of grief. This is based on his personal experience of loss and a sociological analysis of the phenomena of grief in past and present day Anglo-American society (Walter 1994, 1999). He has claimed that the purpose of grief is to enable the bereaved to construct a durable biography of the deceased so they may integrate their memory into their continuing lives. This is achieved principally through conversation with family, friends and neighbours who knew them in life. For parents, constructing such a biography is dependent on having opportunities for what Riches and Dawson (2000) describe as continuing conversational remembering. However, as their study found, bereaved parents cannot always find someone in their own families or social networks prepared to listen to them talking about their late children. Their study highlighted the intense loneliness that bereaved parents experience with regard to partners, surviving children and other family members, as well as the wider social network of friends, neighbours and work colleagues. It also showed that some parents find it difficult to discuss their dead children with those who have not suffered the same loss. These findings demonstrate the need for self-help groups such as Compassionate Friends for, as Klass (1999) identified, within such groups parents can continue to value, remember, celebrate and love their late children.

New model
The concept of continuing bonds challenges the dominant assumption that resolution of grief is achieved through severing bonds with the deceased. At this stage of the discussion we need to consider whether this represents a new model of grief. Walter (1994, 1996, 1999) has drawn attention to the fact that, whilst a major theme of classic bereavement texts is detachment, little attention is given to the continued presence of the dead or of continued conversation or reminiscence about them. Bowlby and Parkes (1970) identified the phenomena now associated with continuing bonds in their London study of bereaved widows who reported an attenuated sense of their dead husband. Likewise, Rees (1971), in his study of 293 widows and widowers living in mid-Wales,
described how 36% reported experiencing their late spouses’ sense of presence years after the initial bereavement. It may be that the emphasis these theorists placed on the theme of detachment at this time derived from their own theoretical position based in the psychoanalytic tradition of Freud. Silverman and Klass (1996) have claimed that their model of continuing bonds is still developing. Nonetheless, as the studies cited in this discussion have shown, it does seem to represent a new model of grief and one based on a theoretical perspective very different from its predecessors.

**Shift to a postmodern understanding of grief**

The evolutionary process above has occurred against a background of change in Anglo/American society. The relationship between prevailing theoretical perspectives on grief and the current zeitgeist, or spirit of the age, will now be considered. Theorists (Silverman & Klass 1996, Riches & Dawson 2000) consider that the assumption of detachment that has dominated psychological research with the bereaved over the last century is rooted in a positivistic model of science that has stressed how separate people are from each other. As Silverman and Klass (1996) have reasoned, this is based on a Westernized worldview of modernity that values autonomy and individualism. In this construct, relationships are seen as instrumental, in that they serve a purpose such as security or intimacy; once they cease to be so, as in the case of death, the relationship is severed. This line of reasoning is supported by Walter (1999), who has suggested that a secular and individualistic culture is likely to discount any relationship with the dead except in individual private experience. Nevertheless, it is apparent that since the 1980s there has been a shift away from a positivist approach to research with the bereaved to a non-positivist one focusing on how people themselves experience grief and make meaning, whilst taking into account their social world.

Walter (1994, 1999) has put forward a convincing case to link changing theoretical perspectives to other changes in Anglo-American society over the last 50 years. He has attributed this shift from a positivist to a non-positivist research paradigm to the emergence of a postmodern society. This, he claims, has been brought about because of a lessening of the infatuation society formerly had with science and technology. He also claims that the rise of secularism has meant that the former Protestant ban on communion with the dead no longer has the same hold. At the same time, people have become aware of other cultures and world religions that have traditions of maintaining contact with the dead. Walter (1999) has predicted that, with this shift towards a more open, diverse and tolerant society, it may become respectable for the first time in over a century to talk openly about sensible contemporary bonding with the dead.

**Conclusions**

I have discussed how theoretical perspectives on parental grief have undergone much change over the last century, and that fundamental differences exist between traditional and new models of grief. These centre on understanding of the resolution of grief and relationship of the bereaved to the dead. Traditional perspectives emphasize how separate and independent people are from each other. Concepts of breaking bonds with the deceased, or of letting go of one’s relationship with the dead, are integral to these. In contrast, new perspectives focus on the social world and place emphasis on how connected people are to each other. Concepts of continuing bonds with the deceased, or of holding on to one’s relationships with them, are integral to these new models.

I have traced how theoretical perspectives and their associated models reflect the zeitgeist, or spirit of the age, in which they were constructed and have shown how these are constantly evolving in response to new research findings. The experience of grief is no longer dominated by a positivistic approach to research or psychoanalytic understandings. Studies by ethnographers, sociologists and psychologists, based on a non-positivistic approach and carried out with bereaved parents themselves, have broken this mould. In doing so, new understandings have been developed that acknowledge the special and unique features of parental grief.

Continuing bonds places emphasis upon parents being able to hold on to their relationship with their child rather than letting go. This counters the often unrealistic expectations by society and even some practitioners that parents should get over the death of their child. It has been shown that parents need to talk about the meaning and influence their late child continues to exert upon their ongoing life. Also, that they derive consolation and solace from holding on to possessions and carrying out rituals associated with their child. In accepting these concepts, practitioners may put into practice therapeutic interventions that support parents. This may include listening to them, or conversational remembering, so they may construct a durable biography of their child. Other interventions such as writing their child’s biography or establishing monetary memorials, may also be supportive and enable parents with others in their social world, as Talbot (2002) described, to honour and remember their child. Many experience social isolation and intense loneliness and find it difficult to talk about their late child to partners, surviving children and the wider social world. Practitioners,

What is already known about this topic

- Popular and traditional models of grief include the grief process and tasks of grief.
- Traditional models of grief are rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition and a positivistic research paradigm.
- Traditional models place emphasis on letting go of, or severing bonds with, the dead child as a means of resolving grief.

What this paper adds

- New models are rooted in a non-positivistic research paradigm and include ethnographic and sociological approaches.
- New models place emphasis on holding on to, or continuing bonds with, the deceased and identify therapeutic interventions to support bereaved parents.
- Both traditional and new models of grief reflect an Anglo-American cultural perspective; future research is needed to adopt a multicultural perspective.

through working with families, could do much to overcome this. Likewise, putting parents in contact with others who have suffered the same loss, such a Compassionate Friends, may be another supportive intervention.

This review only reflects an Anglo-American cultural perspective. Research is now needed to reflect the multicultural diversity of Western societies today to ensure that health care professionals support bereaved parents in their grief, regardless of their background.

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