

THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEXT ON COMPLICATED GRIEF

BY

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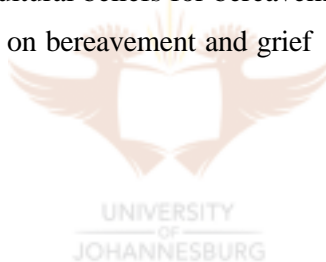
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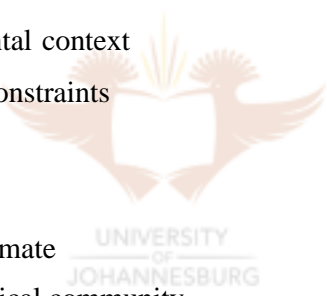
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ABSTRACT

Internationally, significant efforts have been made to understand complicated grief. However, the topic is not well covered in the South African psychological literature and much work remains to be done with regard to gaining insight into factors that contribute towards its development. To this end, the aim of the study was to explore the influence of context on bereavement to the extent that grief becomes complicated. The stance adopted is that bereavement and grief are experiences that cannot be dissociated from the context in which it occurs. From this point of view, bereavement and grief were construed as both personal and social experiences.

Drawing on ecosystemic theory, this study focused on micro and macro contexts. As such, emphasis was on socio-environmental contexts, the family context and the personal context. Literature was surveyed so as to highlight the extent to which these contexts either heighten the risk of maladaptive reactions or served the purpose of ameliorating the impact of bereavement and grief. The literature review was also extended to incorporate an understanding of earlier linear stage and phase theories of grief. Similarly, contemporary conceptual models, which represent more complex multifaceted and integrative approaches, were included. While earlier theorists tended to attribute maladaptive grief to intra-individual pathology, contemporary approaches consider maladaptive grief responses as a function of the individuals' inability to maintain a balance between the different dimensions of their post-bereavement lives.

Methodologically, this study employed an exploratory research approach. Semi-structured interviews based on predetermined guide questions, were conducted with thirteen participants ranging in age from 25 to 45 years. Emphasis was placed on the loss of an attachment relationship, which included the death of a child, sibling, parent, spouse or live-in partner. Both natural and unnatural deaths were focused on. In an effort to control for gender as an external variable, all the participants were females. Responses to the predetermined guide questions were translated into categories. The frequency of responses within each category was calculated and presented as percentages.

Categories in relation to the influence of the socio-environmental context on complicated grief translated into living environment risks and community support. Cognizance was also taken of how macro societal institutions and processes such as socio-economic factors, the political climate and societal attitudes, manifesting in medical attitudes shape the social and personal contexts in which bereavement is experienced and complicated grief is expressed. The influence of these macro institutions and processes filter through to the living environments and communities in which death occurred.

Similarly, categories in relation to the influence of family context on complicated grief translated into family patterns of interaction and relationships, family emotional integration and family support.

Categories reflecting the influence of the personal context on complicated grief were represented by making meaning of the death, the mode of death and the belief systems of the participants. The belief systems were addressed in terms of the participants' religious and cultural beliefs.

Being exploratory in nature, the study did not provide definitive answers with regard to the influence of context on complicated grief. However, it was possible to establish potential relationships between various dimensions of context and complicated grief. The study also highlighted the need for a theory of complicated grief, which embrace contextual influences. This is likely to lend support for situating the locus of complicated grief in the social context in which it occurs. The findings of this research support the idea that complicated grief is being influenced by the social context in which it occurs.

OPSOMMING

Menige pogings is al op internasionale vlak aangewend om gekompliseerde roureaksie te verstaan. Sover dit die Suid-Afrikaanse sielkundige literatuur aangaan word hierdie onderwerp beswaarlik aangespreek en bestaan daar 'n leemte ten opsigte van die faktore wat aanleiding gee tot die ontwikkeling daarvan. Hierdie studie het dit dus ten doel om die invloed van die omgewing op die roureaksie te ondersoek en te bepaal tot watter mate dit die roureaksie kompliseer. Die uitgangspunt van hierdie studie is dat die ervaring van verlies en rou nie van die konteks waarin dit plaasvind geskei kan word nie. Vanuit hierdie standpunt word die ervaring van verlies en rou as beide 'n sosiale en 'n persoonlike ervaring beskou.

Met verwysing na die ekosistemiese teorie as 'n konseptuele raamwerk fokus hierdie studie op beide die mikro en makro kontekste. Daar word dus klem gelê op die sosio-omgewings konteks, die gesinskonteks en die persoonlike konteks. Die doel van die literatuuroorsig was om vas te stel tot watter mate hierdie kontekste die roureaksie intensifiseer of versag. Die literatuurstudie het ook die oorsig van bestaande teorieë ingesluit. Op dieselfde manier is meer gekompliseerde modelle, wat meer omvattend en veelvoudig van aard is ingesluit in die studie. Waar vroeëre teoretici gekompliseerde roureaksie toeskryf aan intra-persoonlike faktore, neem hedendaagse teoretici die standpunt in dat gekompliseerde roureaksie ontwikkel wanneer 'n individu die onvermoë ervaar om die verskillende aspekte van sy/haar lewe weer te balanseer na die afsterwe van 'n betekenisvolle ander.

Hierdie studie is eksploratief van aard. Semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude wat gebaseer is op voorafbepaalde vrae is met dertien deelnemers gevoer. Die ouderdomme van die deelnemers het gewissel van 25 tot 45 jaar. Daar is klem gelê op die gehegheidsverhouding met die oorledene. Dit sluit in die afsterwe van 'n kind, ouer, broer, suster, eggenote of intieme maat. Beide natuurlike en onnatuurlike oorsake van dood is ingesluit. In 'n poging om geslag as 'n uiterlike veranderlike te kontroleer, is al die deelnemers in die studie vroulik. Antwoorde op voorafbepaalde

vrae is in terme van kategorieë ontleed. Die aantal response in elk van die kategorieë is weer bepaal en aangegee as persentasies.

Die sosio-omgewings konteks het twee kategorieë verteenwoordig naamlik: die lewenskontekste asook die ondersteuning van die gemeenskap. In hierdie studie is daar gelet op hoe makro samelewingsinstellings en prosesse soos byvoorbeeld die sosio-ekonomiese faktore, die politieke klimaat en samelewingshoudings en die houding van mediese personeel, die sosiale en persoonlike kontekste waarbinne die gekompliseerde roureaksie ervaar word beïnvloed. Die invloed van hierdie makro-instellings filter deur na die lewenskontekste en gemeenskappe waar die dood plaasvind.

In die poging om die invloed van die familiekonteks op die proses van die gekompliseerde roureaksie te verstaan het die studie fokus geplaas op die gesinsinteraksiepatrone, die gesinsverhoudings, emosionele integrasie en gesinsondersteuning.

Kategorieë van die persoonlike konteks wat van belang geblyk het was die sin/betekenis wat aan die dood geheg was, die wyse waarop die persoon gesterf het en die geloofsoortuigings van die respondente. Die respondente se geloofsoortuigings is aangespreek in terme van hul Godsdienstige en kulturele oortuigings.

Weens die eksploratiewe aard van die studie het dit nie definitiewe antwoorde verskaf rakende die invloed van konteks op gekompliseerde roureaksie nie. Dit was wel moontlik om 'n potensiele verband tussen verskeie dimensies van konteks en gekompliseerde roureaksie vas te stel.

Die studie het ook 'n behoefte beklemtoon met betrekking tot die daarstel van 'n teoretiese onderbou ten opsigte van gekompliseerde roureaksie wat kontekstuele faktore/invloede in ag neem. Die bevindinge van hierdie studie ondersteun die idee dat gekompliseerde roureaksie sterk beïnvloed word deur die konteks waarin dit plaasvind.