



Bereavement needs amongst older people: a neglected policy arena?

Background

Bereavement is a universal experience; only those who themselves die young may escape the pain of losing somebody they love through death. It has been estimated that an average of six surviving people, including family members, friends and loved ones are significantly affected by bereavement. Recent socio-demographic trends, particularly due to increased life expectancies and changing patterns of mortality, have made deaths outside the older age ranges relatively rare occurrences; consequently experiences of bereavement have become largely confined to the later stages of the life course; this will doubtless continue as our populations' age.

Research Aims & Objectives

This study examines whether older people's needs for support are being met during times of bereavement through formal (e.g. G.P; NHS bereavement services etc) and /or informal support networks (e.g. kinship networks)

Research Objectives for older bereaved people living in Wales are to:

- Identify their perceptions and experiences of social support (Functional; Practical; Emotional & Empathetic aid) during times of bereavement
- Identify unmet needs for support
- Contribute to social policy developments in this field

Method

Qualitative interviews using a semi-structured schedule and snowball sampling techniques, undertaken with two study populations; older bereaved individuals (n=10) and service providers (n=6). The interviews aimed to determine what support is available, who provides support and where there is unmet need.

Literature Review: Selected findings

The Bereavement experience

- Bereavement is the cause of great emotional, physiological and social upheaval.

For older people in particular:

- Bereavement is accompanied by additional factors specific to ageing:
 - change of social role (wife, friend, partner, carer)
 - changes in social environment & lifestyle (loss of income; move into residential care)
 - creates/exacerbates existing physical & mental health problems
 - bereavement 'overload' (multiple losses)

Social Support during bereavement

- Social support during bereavement comes primarily from network contacts
- Bereavement can be a 'Social Network Crisis'; network members also grieving and unable to provide support
- Reduced informal networks in later life (death of family/friends; social mobility)
- Formal social support (beyond the immediate network of family/friends) can compensate for deficits in informal support systems

Bereavement services/provisions

- Bereavement is seen as a 'private' affair
- Limited public service provisions
- Formal bereavement support generally from mutual aid/self-help, voluntary & private organisations
- Currently in Wales lack of coherent policy framework/provisions addressing bereavement needs of older people
- Existing services are fragmented, uncoordinated, confined to those who accessed hospital, hospice or palliative care services while the deceased was alive

Bereavement as an unrecognised need: Theoretical Interpretations

Bereavement NOT recognised as a 'Social Problem'

WHY?

The 'Pathologising' of bereavement
.....an individual problem to be cured.....

The 'Individualisation' of bereavement
.....experiences of death & bereavement no longer shared by community.....

Bereavement is 'discounted' in old age
.....'they can handle it'.....ageist assumptions

Theoretical explanations
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Social Constructionism

Findings

Preliminary analysis suggests that **social isolation** and **loneliness** are particularly dominant concerns amongst older bereaved people. **Social change** (e.g. increasing divorce, women in work etc) affects the availability of informal support. Older people interviewed felt that they have particular **unmet needs** for support following bereavement, especially with **practical matters** (such as paperwork, funeral arrangements); **functional support** (such as transport, shopping, cleaning); **emotional support** (companionship; somebody to talk to) and **empathetic support** (shared bereavement experiences).

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Conclusions

Although increased longevity and population ageing mean that bereavement is increasingly likely to become a commonplace experience during later life, and despite significant research evidence indicating its determining effect upon wellbeing, addressing the needs of older bereaved people has remained largely at the periphery of the welfare agenda. Preliminary analysis points to the need for more formalised support for older people during bereavement.

