Current Issues in Grief Theory

Complicated Grief
Complicated Grief

Estimates show between 20 – 33% of people at risk for such a reaction. Perhaps 10 – 20% exhibit it.
What is complicated grief?

A generic term indicating that, given the amount of time since the death, there is some compromise, distortion, or failure of one or more of the processes of mourning

(Rando, 1993, p. 12)
Complicated Grief

- A clinically significant deviation from the cultural norm in either (a) the time or intensity of specific or general symptoms of grief and/or (b) the level of impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008).
The strengths and weaknesses of the DSM are the same – the attempt to take the tremendous variability of human behavior and order it into discreet categories that allow for reliability.
Should there even be a DSM 5 Category for Grief?
A Brief Review of the Debate

- Loss is a normal transitional event, people can be complicated (Silverman)
- Not really, though loss can be a precipitating factor in other disorders such as depression or anxiety and separation disorders
- Yes but the proposed criteria do not identify it
- Yes and early identification offers therapeutic benefit to the client
Inclusion of Complicated Grief in the DSM

Advantages
- Acknowledgment that grief can be complicated and may need treatment
- Reimbursement for treatment

Disadvantages
- Risk of over diagnosis
- Risk of over-medication
- Pathologizing grief
DSM 5
Recent Developments

- General inclusion of Complicated Grief as a subtype of an Adjustment Disorder (Adjustment Disorder Related to Bereavement)
- Separation Anxiety Disorder now includes adults and is differentiated from grief
- Rather than Prolonged Grief Disorder or Complicated Grief, the DSM5 will have a condition called Persistent Complex Bereavement-Related Disorder’ with brief criteria and a suggestion that the condition merits further study in order to be included as a possible bereavement disorder – one form of complicated grief
- Note the DSM now uses Arabic rather than Roman numerals – this will allow minor revisions as 5.1, 5.2 etc.
Additional Concerns

- There should be a recognition that there are many forms of complicated grief
- Thus there may (and should be) further additions
Worden’s Complicated Grief Syndromes

- Chronic
- Exaggerated
- Masked
- Delayed
Rando’s Syndromes of Complicated Mourning

1. Problem in Expression
   - Absent Mourning
   - Delayed Mourning
   - Inhibited Mourning

2. Skewed Aspects
   - Distorted Mourning
   - Conflicted Mourning
   - Unanticipated Mourning

3. Problems with Closure
   - Chronic Mourning
DSM 5

Other Developments

- The “bereavement exclusion” is removed from the diagnosis for a major depressive episode.
The Bereavement Exclusion

Arguments For Elimination

- Many events and stressors can trigger depression, bereavement is the only one singled out for exclusion
- Carefully used will not medicalize grief
The Bereavement Exclusion

Arguments Against Elimination

- Studies have shown that mild depression is a common manifestation of grief
- Danger of over-diagnosing depression and over-medicating the grieving patient
Complicated Grief
A Personal Statement

- For me, a useful element is Nancy Boyd Webb’s notion of disabling grief.
- This means that grief becomes a mental illness when over time, grieving individuals are so disabled by their loss that they can no longer function effectively in key social roles – home, work, or school.