Disenfranchised Grief:
Recognizing Hidden Sorrow

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“You know, we’re just not reaching that guy.”
Beyond Feeling Rules

- It is acceptable to grieve the deaths of family members
Not all Losses Are Death Related
A recognition that grief reactions do not necessarily entail death

Secondary Losses
Anticipatory Grief
Transitions inevitably entail loss
Disenfranchised Grief

Worden’s Formulation

Change = Loss = Grief
WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO?
TO THE NURSING HOME TO SEE MRS. BIRK.

I'M TAKING HER HOME.
Baking, photos of the kids - stuff like that.

I WORRY ABOUT HER. SHE REALLY DOESN'T HAVE ANY FAMILY.

SOMETIMES YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE RELATED TO BE FAMILY.
parents don't approve of my new boyfriend. I never even approve of my husband.
Disenfranchised Grief

A loss that cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged or publicly mourned
Disenfranchised Grief

The Right to Grief
The Dimensions of Disenfranchised Grief

- Sociological
- Intrapsychic (Kauffman)
- Political (Attig)
- Interactional
  - Neimeyer & Jordan “Empathic Failure”
Socio-Political Dimension of Disenfranchised Grief

- Cultural feeling rules assign sympathy to victims considered “above reproach”. This process is influenced by class, race, and ethnicity. (Martin, 2005)
Contexts of Disenfranchised Grief

- Relationship is not recognized
- Loss is not acknowledged
- Griever is not recognized
- Disenfranchised deaths
- Ways individuals grieve
Relationship is not recognized

- Friend
- Ex-spouse
- Lover/partner
- Co-Worker
- Therapist/patient
- Caregiver
- Teacher/coach
- Celebrity
Disenfranchised Grief

- We can grieve persons we did not even know
- Example – Grieving a sibling one never knew (Kempson & Murdock, 2010)
Disenfranchised Grief
Sensitivity to Online Relationships

- Online Relationships
- Chat Room Relationships
- Participants in massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG)
- The funeral of Toxik/Chris (Hensley, 2009)
Loss is not acknowledged

- Perinatal loss
- Elective abortion
- Incarceration
- Job loss
- Infertility
- Family abandonment or alienation
- Broken relationships - divorce
- Loss of an animal companion
- Relocation
- Psychosocial loss
- Illness and anticipatory grief
Developmental Losses

As we age, we may experience a range of losses as we transition to another developmental period.

These losses can be profound as we move to later life but can even be significant as we give up childhood activities and toys to embrace the responsibilities of adolescence and emerging adulthood.
Griever is not recognized

- Persons with developmental disabilities
- Persons with mental illness or dementia
- The very young
- The very old
Grief in Prison

- Place as disenfranchising
- Grief can be highly disenfranchised in prison
- Inability or limits for participation in care or rituals
- Cost of emotional vulnerability
- Likelihood of complicated relationships
- Prison relationships
Disenfranchising deaths

- Homicide
- Executions and Martyrdom
- Suicide (including Assisted Suicide)
- HIV/AIDS
“Devalued” Deaths

- The very old
- Persons with disabilities
Ways individuals grieve

- Cultural aspects
- Styles of grieving
Intuitive vs. Instrumental
Grieving Styles Exist along a Continuum
Disenfranchisement and Grieving Styles

- Male Intuitive Grievers
- Female Instrumental Grievers
- Instrumental Grievers (early)
- Intuitive Grievers (late)
- Counselor’s Disenfranchisement of Instrumental Grievers
These contexts are neither exclusive nor exhaustive
Disenfranchised Grief in the Lifecycle

Example - Siblings
Caution

- Selected sub-cultures may enfranchise
- Disenfranchisement may vary across time
- Disenfranchisement may vary between cultures or classes
Culture and Disenfranchised Grief

- Certain sub-cultures may recognize certain losses as important even if these are not always acknowledged within the larger society.
- African-Americans and fictive kin
- Hispanics/Latinos and godparents/godchildren
The Degree of Disenfranchisement

Assessing levels and sources of support
All grief becomes disenfranchised over time
The Evidentiary Basis of Disenfranchised Grief

- A number of studies have identified disenfranchised grief in a number of populations including adult children of dysfunctional families, carriers of Huntington’s disease, persons with genetic abnormalities, migrants leaving or re-entering, parents of children with disabilities, gay partners, families with AIDS deaths, Nursing Assistants, Families of Death Row inmates.

- Verity and Gwyn (2008) found deleterious effects on psycho-social health for disenfranchised grievers.

Possible Complications of Disenfranchised Grief

- Often intensified reactions
- Lack of social support
- Inability to participate in dying process
- Problem of ritual
- Concurrent crises
The Paradox of Disenfranchised Grief

Grief is intensified but the usual social supports are missing
Sensitivity to Loss
The Power of Naming
The Role of Education and Self-Advocacy
Analyze Empathic Failure
Counter Empathic Failure

- Counseling
- Support Groups
- Therapeutic Ritual
Grief is manifested in many ways

- Physically
- Emotionally (including positive emotions)
- Cognitively
- Behaviorally
- Spiritually
The Grief Process
A Roller Coaster of Reactions
Grief is not a time bound process that ends in detachment.
Over time the intensity of grief reactions lessen
Persons function at similar (or sometimes better levels) than prior to the loss
Yet, grief still has a developmental aspect
The Tasks of Grief

- Acknowledge the loss
- Express manifest and latent emotion
- Adjust to a changed life
- Relocate the loss
- Reconstitute faith and philosophical systems challenged by the loss

Worden (Modified)
Remember!

Disenfranchised Grief Is Grief
Martha is a 43 year-old divorced, white female. She has been divorced for 7 years after being married for 13 years. She has custody of her 14 year-old son and her 18 year-old daughter. The divorce was very bitter, the result of her husband’s extra-marital affair with her close friend. Her relationship with her late ex-husband was tenuous, but he did share weekend custody of her son. Her daughter, on the other hand, refused to visit.

Her husband had been sick for 2 years. She had visited him once in the hospital, but felt the visit uncomfortable and tense. After much soul searching, she did attend the funeral with her son. She found the experience “horrible,” resenting the new wife’s warmth, the interaction between that wife and her son, and the funeral homily where her ex-spouse was praised as “a loving family man” and the wife as “a courageous caregiver”. She says she needs to talk with someone before “she goes crazy.” She is upset with her children resenting both her son’s grief and her daughter’s indifferences. She also feels her friends do not understand and she doesn’t feel comfortable in talking with her new boyfriend.
The Challenge of Grief Groups

- The limits of heterogeneous groups
- The value of need assessment
Utilizing Rituals

- Widening the circle
- The mandate of noninterference – respectful of other mourners
- Creating therapeutic rituals
Value of Concept of “Disenfranchised Grief”

- Increased sensitivity to dimensions of loss
- A sociological perspective to loss that challenges a solely intrapsychic perspective
- New therapeutic approaches (Neimeyer & Jordan – analyze empathic failure)
- Heuristic Value
Heuristic Value
Related Concepts

- Ambiguous Loss (Boss)
- Chronic Sorrow (Roos)
- Nonfinite Loss (Bruce & Schultz)
Chronic Sorrow

- A set of pervasive, profound, continuing, and reoccurring grief responses resulting from a significant loss, or the absence or crucial aspects of self or another to whom there is deep attachment” (Roos)

- The role of fantasy – “What might have been”
Criticisms of Concept of “Disenfranchised Grief”

- The cost of enfranchisement (Kamerman)
- The risk of trivializing the definition of grief (Cable)
- Hierarchies of Grief (Robson & Walter)
The Charge of Disenfranchised Grief

Enfranchising the disenfranchised