Permission to grieve, please: Exploring the concept of disenfranchised grief

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Abstract

The death of a loved one can be devastating to those who remain behind. The sense of profound loss, pain, emptiness, and disorientation presents significant challenges to those who experience such losses, and even other types of losses. Although grief and mourning are normal responses to this, the process itself may be complex and challenging. This can be particularly true when the grieving process is disrupted, may be regarded as inappropriate, or even worse, when it is not legitimised at all. The article explores some of the dynamics of prolonged or complicated grieving related to the loss of a loved one, with particular focus on the notion of disenfranchised grief. The author argues that ignoring the existence and impact of grief-denying cultures and practices, due to social delegitimization, or other factors, may severely impact a person's ability to regain a meaningful and balanced life after such loss. In discussing these the article inevitably reflects on the relevance and appropriateness of the notions of disenfranchised grief and prolonged or complicated grief.

Keywords

Loss; grief; bereavement; disenfranchised grief; prolonged grief disorder; complicated grief; hierarchies of loss

Introduction

Death is a cruel thing. It's not life, and yet we say it's part of life. But it is just death. It is the event when earthly life stops for the one who died. Sadly, often life also stops for the one who stays behind, even only for a while. I think death comes twice at once. A person dies and is buried or cremated, and then "life goes on". Through the simultaneous second strike, those left behind die too in a sense – at least part of what constituted their existence and meaning dies. However, instead of being buried, their bodies now

become the graves; the "final" resting place of what once was and what was dreamt of, the grave of a future of togetherness that can now not ever be, the grave of the fading memories, of what once made sense; of hope denied; a walking tombstone of loss. Only death itself can liberate this grave from the remains it holds, it seems. Yet, it also is not really that. Deep within, it houses the sense of loss and pain, a reminder that somehow, it's neither dead nor grave.

The above excerpt was taken from reflective notes I wrote at a time when I journeyed with several people struggling to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. Not only do these words try to capture something of what I had observed in engaging with grieving people, but it is all too familiar from my own journey with grief and bereavement. This lingering and persistent presence of the struggle for meaning and hope amidst the unbearable pain of loss, resonates with that of experiences of significant trauma or disruption. One is then often left to navigate life in the unbearable and ambiguous space between promise and fulfilment.

This article firstly sets out to discuss some aspects related to loss, particularly the loss of a loved one, as one of the themes emerging from previous ministry engagements and research. The article specifically seeks to engage the concept of disenfranchised grief, exploring its value in understanding some aspects related to prolonged or complicated grief.

Loss as traumatic experience – a promise of rain?

Whether dealing with a loss or some other traumatic experience, most people seem to experience some sense of wilderness and in-betweenness in the process. Summer rainfall areas, like the south of Namibia, often witness the build-up of dark clouds in the air, broadcasting the promise of a refreshing and thirst-quenching outpour, only for these to be swept away by strong, dusty winds, suddenly and almost unexpectedly. This happens repeatedly during the summer, leaving those in the waiting unfulfilled, dissatisfied, and disappointed. To me this image serves as a metaphor of "a promise of rain", expressing something of an in-betweenness of being. In this unfulfilling space, one waits, hopes, and imagine, yet is often left disappointed and even with resentment. However, you find that you keep

hoping – hope against hope. In a way then it communicates something about the experiences of people yearning for reprieve, restoration, healing, a quenching, as they deal with the effects of trauma or loss. In this "dry and inhospitable space" – just as the eyes are fixed on the heavens in anticipation of the shower – a silent, pleading, yet often sceptical gaze towards the heavens calls to God (or someone) to intervene. Here the constant battle between disclosure (to talk about it) and concealment (to hide or deny it) of the reality of the loss and trauma is fought (Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela 2007: viii) as people search for ways to integrate their experiences and to make sense of a new disrupted reality in their lives.

Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela (2007: vii) refer to trauma as "the 'undoing of the self', and as loss: loss of control, loss of one's identity, loss of the ability to remember, and loss of language to describe the horrific events", a description very much fitting of this in-between space of nothingness. The disrupting and distressing nature of trauma, its ability to turn life upside-down, to break down all sense of meaning and certainty, which tends to lead to a constant questioning of what once was held dear and in high regard – relationships, faith, religion, God – have been discussed extensively in the past (Kleber, Figley & Gersons 1995; Suedfeld 1997; Figley 1999; Ganzevoort 2000, 2009 & 2011; Veerman & Ganzevoort 2001; Alexander et al. 2004; Audergon 2004; Hutchison & Bleiker 2008 and Lopez 2011). Struggling to deal with trauma and loss may often feel as if one is hopelessly stuck in this space between promise and (not yet) fulfilment, constantly fighting the "disillusionment, disappointment, hopelessness and helplessness, frustration, and anger" (Mouton 2023:82). A sense of disempowerment remains (Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela 2007: viii) unless such experiences are adequately dealt with. Trauma has both individual and collective dimensions (Kleber, Figley & Gersons 1995:1; Suedfeld 1997; Ganzevoort 2000; Veerman & Ganzevoort 2001; Alexander et al. 2004; Audergon 2004; Van den Blink 2008:31, Lopez 2011) and how it is experienced or dealt with may be impacted upon by "societal and cultural dimensions" (Kleber, Figley & Gersons 1995:1–4), which also applies to the experiences of loss.

The deep sense of loss, when a loved one dies for example, is often accompanied with a sense of pain, hurt, emptiness, and a disruptive

disorientation. Such disorientation not only relates to an acute inability to imagine life without a loved one but can also be experienced as a deep sense of confusion in relation to the meaning of life in general. This is often further complicated by struggles of faith and tensions about God, religion and one's lived reality (Mouton 2023:86). Questions about God's role in such loss, often centred around God's (in)ability to have prevented the loss, may plague those dealing with a significant loss. This can be particularly intense when such a loss causes a multiplicity of other losses, such as the loss of security, material provision, and safety, for example. Mecer and Evans (2006:219), in a paper discussing the impact of multiple losses on grieving processes, argue that people experiencing multiple losses often grieve for longer periods or their grieving process is interrupted, resulting in significant challenges to restore their ability to go on with live. People deal differently with loss and the way they grieve can be affected by several factors. These may include the type of loss, the spirituality and faith maturity of a person, the nature and quality of their relationships with the departed, the relationship with God as well as prevalent God images, the time of and circumstances surrounding the loss, and other factors. Variations in how people deal with loss and grief may also be related to cultural and ethnic differences (Rosenblatt 2008, Rosenblatt 2014), age (Zoler 2002), the cause of the loss or death (Laing and Moules 2015), gender (Levang 1998), and many other reasons. Although it may be assumed that religion and spirituality also affect the grieving process, Becker et al. (2007:215), in a review of the influence on religious and spiritual beliefs on bereavement, conclude that although "[m]ost studies reported positive effects of spiritual or religious beliefs on bereavement. […] there is a lack of evidence because of weaknesses in design and methodological flaws" in these studies. My own experience suggest that spirituality and religious beliefs do have an impact on bereavement and those with a strong sense of spirituality appear to be able to deal with loss and grief in healthier ways and in a shorter period.

Although one may find some way to continue to live after experiencing a significant loss, the loss and its affects never really leave. Whereas some may feel entirely free to express their grief and mourn in whatever way they feel necessary, not all are necessarily able to do so. In such cases the grieving process may become problematic or complicated, which may introduce

further psycho-social and spiritual challenges. In the next sections the article will briefly discuss some theoretical aspects related to grief and bereavement before exploring the concept of prolonged or complicated grief and the notion of disenfranchised grief, including its ability to impede the process of healing and restoration after the loss of a loved one.

Grief and bereavement – a normal process?

Abi-Hashem (1999:309) states that "[h]uman life is a series of attachments and detachments, gains, and losses" and that "[g]rief emotions are a natural response to any separation or loss". Abi-Hashem (1999:311) further argues that "deep and meaningful attachment" necessitates "a process of grief and bereavement". McCall (2004:4,7) also argues that responding with grief and bereavement to a loss, is normal and natural. Yet even though grief is natural, universal, and a normal response to loss (McCall 2004:4,7) each person experiences it differently (see also Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005). Also, grief may be for losses other than the loss of a loved one (Gitterman and Knight 2019:147–155). Burnell and Burnell (in Abi-Hashem 1999:310) explain this by looking at the etymology of the word "loss". According to these authors the word "has roots in the old English language and means 'to rob', 'to plunder' or 'to dispossesses', and relates to the experience of having someone or something taken away forcefully, which may include anything of value or a relationship of significance."

Regarding the grieving process, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) identify five stages, i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, characterizing the grieving process. However, the authors recognize that each person grieves differently, and it is therefore important to understand that this framework does not applies equally for everyone and under all circumstances. Neither should it be seen as a sequential process through which a person experiences all the "stages" mentioned. This framework has been criticized over the years. Peña-Vargas, Armaiz-Peña and Castro-Figueroa (2021), for example, criticize the framework for "poor consistency and validity concerning the linearity of these stages". Both Christopher Hall (2014) and Ian Hamilton (2016) argue that this, and other models, do not capture the complexities and nuances of the grieving process adequately. McCall (2004:46–53) opts for a different or amended framework

and proposes that grief goes through a series of six stages, namely shock and numbness, denial, feelings, depression, reorganization, and recovery. Stroebe & Schut (1999) argue for a dual process model regarding bereavement. These authors argue that the so-called traditional "griefwork hypothesis" is limited in many aspects (1999:202–204). Instead of a stage model, Stroebe & Schut (1999:211–217) propose the "Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement" whereby the grieving process is understood to oscillate between "loss- and restoration-oriented coping" (1999:212). Whereas the former relates to dealing with the actual loss, i.e. the death of a loved one, the latter has to do with dealing with secondary losses or stressors resulting from the initial loss in order to maintain some form of meaningful life. Whether one opts for the framework of Kübler-Ross and Kessler or some other framework, the reality is that any significant loss results in significant grief and bereavement which should be navigated and meaningfully dealt with. In this respect McCall (2004) in her book *Bereavement Counselling: Pastoral Care for Complicated Grieving*, argues for a holistic approach to dealing with loss and grief. This calls for "the significance of the spiritual nature of grief and the spiritual aspects of the healing process" to be taken seriously (Mouton 2023:93). This approach acknowledges that grieving is "both journey and process … where the roadmap is not always clear, the process not static and the outcomes not always guaranteed" (Mouton 2023:93). It is however not about arriving back at the exact state of being prior to a significant loss. On this journey there is no talk of a "pre-loss" state as destination. Instead, McCall (2004:14) proposes an approach to healing and restoration through a process of integration and restoration that "implies space for agency, imagination, movement, and subsequent hope" (Mouton 2023:91). This ability to meaningfully traverse the new reality through the process of grief and bereavement is aptly described by McCall (2004:14) as "continuity of being". Through this process of reorientation, reorganization, and reconstruction, it becomes possible to let go of the anger, bitterness, and regrets, holding on to the memories and recollections that rekindles the comforting reality of a true bond that existed, further maintaining such bond. A new life can now be reimagined, making "continuity of being" possible, boldly affirming "life, living and contentment despite the experience of loss" (Mouton 2023:93).

When grief becomes complicated

Despite grief being a normal response to loss, it is hardly ever without some level of complexity. Whereas some may resolve these complexities adequately, in other cases the trajectory may be disrupted, and the process is augmented to the extent that grief becomes complicated, challenging people's ability to adapt to their new reality (Ginzburg, Geron and Solomom 2002:120). Complicated grief, which may then evolve, can be defined as "a holistic grief response that is more intense than would be otherwise indicated; longer lasting than typical; and at the same time, pervasively affects the grieving person's daily life (and behaviours) in significant and negative ways" (McCall 2004:70). For Stroebe & Schut (2005:66) complicated grief may be categorized as "chronic, delayed and inhibited grief" (Stroebe & Schut 2005:66). Chiu et al (2010:1322) defines it as "a cluster of experiences that includes separation distress, post-traumatic stress, and an inability to cope with the loss of a loved one" cf. Dyregrov and Dyregrov 2013). Hall (2014:11) and Shear (2015:154) advance that complicated grief is often associated with a prolonged process and exhibiting signs of increased severity impacting negatively on daily functioning. For Doering and Eisma (2016:286) complicated grief can be understood as referring to "disturbed grief patterns" that entails suffering from "severe and disabling grief for a prolonged period of time". Although the term "complicated grief" may still be used widely, the phenomena described thus far is referred to as prolonged grief disorder in the DSM-5-TR (APA 2022). This usually involves a "prolonged maladaptive grief reaction … after at least 12 months … since the death of someone with whom the bereaved had a close relationship" and is further described as an "[i]ntense yearning or longing for the deceased, intense sorrow and emotional pain, and preoccupation with the deceased or the circumstances of the death are expected responses occurring in prolonged grief disorder" (APA 2022). A multitude of factors may contribute to prolonged grief disorder/complicated grief. Similarly, there may be a range of reasons for people not to be able to adequately mourn the loss of a loved one, including factors related to societal prejudice, cultural norms, or even be due to a person's own evaluation of their right to grief. When a person does not feel entitled or sanctioned to mourn a loss, i.e. a person experiences the denial

of their loss or their right to grieve, such a person may be dealing with a form of disenfranchised grief.

Unpacking disenfranchised grief

Whereas bereavement is experienced on the inside, the act of mourning is the external and public expression of grief and bereavement and is most often influenced by social and cultural norms and expectations (Abi-Hashem 199:312). When the social and cultural norms and expectations, or other factors, inhibit or even prohibit bereavement and mourning, the healing process may be significantly augmented, delayed, stifled, or stunted. When social norms and views for instance fail to give legitimacy to a loss (grief is not recognized) or how that loss is mourned, this may lead to a person being denied the right to mourn publicly (Corr 2002:39–60). This phenomenon, termed by some scholars as disenfranchised grief, is defined by Kenneth Doka as "the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Doka 1989:4). Disenfranchised grief may also be due to perceptions about the kind of death, such as suicide, or the circumstances around the loss. It may also present where the relationship between the deceased and the griever is not sanctioned or acknowledged by society and the griever is not expected to or feel not allowed to mourn publicly for the loss (Corr 1999:1, Attig 2004, Thatcher 2018:23).

Building on the original work of Doka who first coined the term "disenfranchised grief", Corr (1999:2–4) highlights four ways in which grief can be disenfranchised due to societal perceptions and assumptions. These being disenfranchised relationships, disenfranchised losses, disenfranchised grievers, and disenfranchising deaths. Disenfranchised relationships may include that between divorcees, socially designated illegitimate relationships, and even collegial and other relationships where the assumption may exist that the loss is not so significant as to warrant any form of intense public grieving. Disenfranchised losses are those losses which society is unable to or refuse to acknowledge as events that constitute a significant loss. This may include perinatal deaths, abortions, the death of a pet, the loss of significant relationships, or losing someone after a long and very painful illness or at a very advanced age. Valentine, Bauld, and

Walter (2016:283–301) also demonstrate how stigma and complications in relationship with someone with substance abuse tendencies may contribute to prolonged grief disorder (complicated grief) and disenfranchised grief following a substance use related death. About the notion of a disenfranchised grievers, Corr (1999:3) contends that "disenfranchisement mainly has to do with certain individuals to whom the socially recognized status of griever is not attached". In other words, the perception is that such persons do not have the capability to grief, a view often held of young children, very old people, and the disabled. The concept thus "applies not to a relationship or to a loss, but to the individual survivor whose status as a leading actor or protagonist in the human drama of bereavement is not recognized or appreciated" (Corr 1999:3).

In some cases, certain types of death may be regarded as not being worthy to mourn. Not so long ago, people often refused to mourn the death of someone who died from HIV/AIDS. Although this may still happen, it is probably much less than during the early years of the pandemic. In some communities, death by suicide elicit anger instead of grief and such deaths are often not allowed to be mourned publicly. Another could be that of the loss of a same-sex partner in a society where same-sex relationships are not accepted. It is important to keep in mind, as Corr (1999:4) also asserts, that these do not apply universally to all communities and are deeply related to cultural, traditional, and religious worldviews.

The word "disenfranchise" derives its meaning from the term "enfranchise" of which, the meaning according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2023), centres around the idea of being free, being set free, being granted rights, being granted access, being granted permission, or to be entitled to. That would mean that disenfranchised grief, by definition, implies denying the freedom, right and permission to grief – like saying you have no licence to grieve. Whereas enfranchised grief presupposes the societal recognition of the loss and resultant grief and explicit permission to mourn publicly, disenfranchised grief denies these and withholds the legitimization of a loss and the "permission" to mourn such a loss in the open. Attig (2004:198) makes the point that the disenfranchising is not simply a matter of indifference to the experiences and efforts of the bereaved. It is more actively negative and destructive as it involves denial of entitlement, interference, and even imposition of sanction. Disenfranchising messages

actively discount, dismiss, disapprove, discourage, invalidate, and delegitimate the experiences and efforts of grieving. And disenfranchising behaviours interfere with the exercise of the right to grieve by withholding permission, disallowing, constraining, hindering, and even prohibiting it.

Through ministry and grief counselling I have encountered several possible cases of disenfranchised grief. One example is that of a woman in her sixties who, while recounting the recent death of her son during a group bereavement session, started weeping uncontrollably. Even though she was trying to speak, we could not make out what she said. Eventually it transpired that she was not only crying over the death of her son, but now even more intensely for his father who had died over twenty years before. But why? It turns out that their relationship was never accepted and sanctioned by his family, and at the time of his death she was not allowed to partake in any form of ritualistic mourning practices. In fact, she was not allowed near any of it and at the time resolved to keep her grief and sadness to herself. Imagine the pain and anguish of not being able to say goodbye for one last time. Not only was she denied the opportunity to mourn her deep loss, but as a result could also not call on the comfort, empathy, and care of the community. After all, she was not his real wife. As she accepted the reality at the time, thinking that it is out of respect for her late lover and his grieving family, she never imagined the intense sadness she would carry for the rest of her life. She did not expect this intense pain to morph into a destructive mode of anger, sadly mostly destructive to her and her family. This moment was the first time that she publicly mourned his death. The denial to grieve the love of her life at that time had devastating effects on her life and that of her family. After her outpouring, a calmness and peacefulness were apparent on her face and in her whole posture. Without going into detail, it may be worthwhile to highlight a few things that happened that may have helped. Firstly, she could only muster the courage to speak about her loss from the past because of the open and inclusive space that was intentionally created. Sharing her pain, although very necessary, was not enough. As a group we had to affirm the legitimacy of her loss and her pain, and we did that through caring gestures, words of comfort, a genuine interest in what she was willing to share, and patiently allowing her the time she needed to share and reflect. The pain did not disappear momentarily but being able to share it and having it acknowledged and

affirmed "enfranchised" her to now embark on her bereavement journey without the shame and rejection she carried with her for so long.

Grief, like trauma, is experienced and responded to within a specific socio-cultural context and the way that it is experienced and responded to is often regulated by perceptions related to this context. In the case of disenfranchised grief, there is a definitive denial of recognition, giving rise to the absence of communal support (Corr 1999:5). This is not merely about people being silent in their grief, but rather the silencing of their grief, which may lead to further complications in the process and additional burdens to bear in the absence of meaningful communal support. The element of judgement makes for a further withdrawal, often leaving the griever with intense emotional reactions and insecurity about relationships. Thomas Attig (2004:200–205) regards the disenfranchisement of grief as a "serious social failure" on at least three levels. Firstly, there is the failure to empathize, that is failing "to appreciate either the gravity of what has happened or the resulting anguish and loss of meaning in the mourner's life" … "and as such it is hurtful and destructive" (Attig 2004:201). Secondly, Attig argues that it constitutes a political failure (2004:201–202) as it involves the "abuse of power and neglect", as well as that of authority when those with assumed authority presume to know and to decide for others. The result is that "the discouragement, interference, and sanction it brings into the lives of the bereaved actually adds to their suffering unnecessarily" (Attig 2004:202). Lastly, as an ethical failure "it is a failure to respect the bereaved" (Attig 2004:204), but also a failure to "understand and appreciate the potential for thriving inherent in the bereaved" (Attig 2004:205). In such circumstances a real threat is posed to the process of integration and restoration, and continuity of being becomes elusive and challenging.

However, the concept of disenfranchised grief is not without critique. Patricia Robsen and Tony Walter (2013:97–119) for example criticize the apparent simplistic binary approach in the concept of disenfranchised grief. They argue that the grieving process depends on various factors, stating that not all losses necessarily give rise to a marked grieving process. They argue that different types of legitimizations rather relate to a hierarchical understanding of loss (2013:99) or a "hierarchy of social expectations about grief" (2013:108). The concept of hierarchies of loss implies that certain types of losses may be prioritized over others based on perceptions about

its importance in society and hence may be more deserving of support. Just as in the case of disenfranchised grief, people grieving a loss may experience their loss as being invalidated and hence they may not receive the emotional support they need or may even feel discouraged to seek help, eventually leaving the door open for possible complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder to set in. In both cases societal perceptions and expectations play a role, and both have the potential to negatively impact the grieving individual. It is also possible, as Kauffman (2002:61–78), Kauffman (2010) and Robsen & Walter (2013:97–119) argue that a person may deny themselves the right to grieve, which does not necessarily relate to a case of social delegitimization. Another concept that is sometimes offered as an alternative to the concept of disenfranchised grief and the so-called stage models, is that of differential grief. The concept is sometimes employed in understanding different grief responses within families (Gilbert 1996) and emphasises the fact that every individual grieves differently due to their relationship with the deceased, cultural perceptions, religious beliefs, personality, and the circumstances of the loss.

Despite their differences, disenfranchised grief, hierarchies of loss, and differential grief add to the understanding of grief dynamics and may provide insight into possible pastoral responses to grief. Although the concept of disenfranchised grief may not be unproblematic, it does help to understand how a lack of recognition, denial and delegitimization of loss and grief have the potential to increase the risk of complicated grief/prolonged grief disorder and hinders the chances for meaningful mourning and restoration in the end. However, as Attig (2004:205–208) argues, reflections on disenfranchised grief should be broadened to consider aspects of a person's resilience and ability to continue living meaningfully (continuity of being). These are matters of hope and love, and Attig (2004:205–213) pleads for these to be enfranchised (or perhaps re-enfranchised) as an appropriate response to the phenomena of disenfranchised grief. Other considerations for support, stemming from the three theories can include: differential approaches to pastoral care and support, sensitivity for circumstances surrounding a loss, sensitivity for cultural and religious worldviews and beliefs, validation of both the loss and the grief response, a sensitivity for the uniqueness of each individual's grief response, avoiding prescriptive frameworks and pre-defined milestones and outcomes, and an awareness

of the dynamics of grief in general and of disenfranchised grief as catalyst for prolonged grief disorder/complicated grief in particular.

Conclusion

Grief, despite being complex in nature, is a rather normal and appropriate response to the experience of loss. When the grieving process becomes complicated, a person's ability to adequately deal with the experience of loss is significantly hampered. This may lead to a prolonged process and has the potential to significantly impact a person's sense of identity and continuity of being. Disenfranchised grief, broadly implying the denial of loss and the right to mourn, generally complicates the grieving process of a person and often leads to a deepening of the trauma related to a significant loss. By way of an example, the article demonstrated the relevance of the concept. However, further research on the phenomena, its impact on grieving processes, and possible "enfranchising" responses will enrich the existing scholarship on the concept.

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