

Losing Touch with Childhood Grief

Challenge Mapping:

The definition of grief is broad in its scope due to the personalized experience of grieving that individuals face. For this paper, grief can be defined as an emotional response to loss (Doka, 2000), specifically the loss of human life. Grief is interesting due to the lack of discussion and acceptance following a loss despite the many people that share this experience. In addressing grief as a taboo, understanding the suffering associated with bereavement in the life of children is crucial.

I lost my mom to pancreatic cancer at the age of 18. My younger brother was 13 at the time, and as a young adult, I have learned firsthand the impacts of grief while observing how the loss affected his life at such a young age as well. We've both handled the loss of our mom admirably; through excelling in school, taking on new hobbies, letting ourselves be sad, and also remembering to take care of ourselves and each other. Our attitudes and actions have been foundational in allowing our grief to serve as a minor presence in life. However, we have faced the hardship of balancing grief in our life when socially, it is not accepted. When my mom comes up in conversation with others my age, it is uncomfortable and typically avoided. I struggle when meeting new people and referring to my dad as "my parents" when the topic arises to fit in with those around me and avoid an uncomfortable interaction. I would love to talk about my mom and to cherish her legacy and memory, but those who have not experienced this form of loss in their lives do not understand how to respond and feel inconvenienced by my grief. Therefore, addressing the lack of support for grieving children is necessary for society to defeat the taboo of emotional instability and necessary conversations to overcome personal challenges.

The history of grief in children and the societal norms and institutions upholding the status quo are defining aspects of society that lack the means to change. According to Robert Kastenbaum, "we like to think of childhood as 'the kingdom where nobody dies'" (Doka, 2000). This is an interesting aspect of raising children where many parents tend to avoid the realities of life in hopes of sheltering their children. Like grief, there are many aspects of the human experience that are not only difficult to discuss but

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virtually impossible to explain to a small child without corrupting their learning in a sense. Therefore, “in the name of protecting our children, we keep information from them and deny them the opportunity to feel their grief” (Fiorini and Mullen, 2006). In this way, parents act as incumbents by shielding children from the tragedies associated with life. If a child must face bereavement firsthand, their emotional and cognitive abilities aren’t prepared to understand death.

Governance units associated with grief in society contribute to the difficulty in supporting the grieving youth. According to the United Nations Children Fund, “there are currently over one hundred million children around the world coping without some form of parental care” (Cohen and Sossin, 2014). Of that population and specifically in America, “approximately 4 percent of children live without either parent and 26 percent live with one parent” (Cohen and Sossin, 2014). This population is larger than one would expect, but the resources provided to grieving children are slim. For example, therapy and counseling are less accessible due to the financial expense of attending each session.

From my own experience, I was encouraged to meet with social workers in the hospital when my mom was sick. This was appreciated but is only applicable to certain situations like mine with a parent battling cancer. Unique Hospice services like a year of counseling free of charge are also available in these situations. Although these government-funded programs and instances may be beneficial in some circumstances, “in general, Western society is described as a death-denying and product-driven society whose foundation rests upon capitalism and patriarchal hierarchies in all significant social institutions” (Harris, 2009). A precise example of this is defined by the role of school counselors, who assist with registering for classes and completing college applications, rather than checking in on children who have experienced a major loss. “Free riders” symbolize those who reap the benefits of care indirectly, which applies to this situation. Children who discuss their grief with others enter the world and function normally, positively impacting the people they are surrounded by though those people didn’t assist the process in supporting the child’s overall emotional state. The society also abides by unspoken rules in which those experiencing grief are expected to move on in a certain time frame or to a certain extent.

Many individuals are directly affected by grief at some point in their lifetime. Therefore, it is questionable as to why children don't receive the necessary support to overcome their grief and to be socially accepted in society despite their trauma. This may be the case because "death and grief signify vulnerability, which is a sign of weakness. In a social system that is based upon competition and acquisition, weakness is not tolerable, and so grief goes underground" (Harris, 2009). In the ladder of social participation, children fall under the non-participation realm in which they aren't emotionally built to contribute to societal issues at this stage in their life. However, we tend to forget that bereavement is long-lasting, where a child who experiences grief loss will grieve that person for the rest of their life (National Alliance for Grieving Children, 2013). This connects to Wuthnow's findings in *First Steps* where the family is the foundation for care (Wuthnow, 1995). Regarding the concern of care in this society, how can one learn how to care if they didn't observe this from their parents? And consequently, how can children learn to cope with mourning and grief if their parents can't do the same?

This form of suffering is related to several other aspects of society, in which individuals must function as social beings rather than emotional beings. Victims of tragedies who feel grief different from those who experience a loss are forced to hide their true feelings out of respect for others. We feel uncomfortable sharing our emotional struggles regardless of the cause, as the consequences of opening up to others who may not reciprocate the feeling is too grave. Similar to those referenced in Boltanski's observations of spectators' responses to suffering, those who lack an understanding of empathy to another person's situation see sufferers as outside the realm of their experience. Following a traumatic event, the harsh realization that others truly don't know what it feels like unless they experience it settles in. In this case, children who experience grief loss are left to their own devices and will find social and emotional connections with those who share a common sense of grief. This is relevant to Wenar's claims in "Is Humanity Getting Better?" where "The real trick to understanding our world is to see it with both eyes at once... What we take for granted frames the size of our concerns" (Wenar, 2016).

Solution Mapping:

The lack of support for grieving children has been addressed by individuals and groups in a variety of ways. Individuals who have experienced grief at a young age mainly serve as the voices demanding increased awareness and change. The Dead Parent Club, a podcast created by a young woman living in the United Kingdom grieving the loss of her mother, helped me immensely in my early stages of grief. She interviews those who have been through loss at a young age and discusses their story, their feelings, and their strategies in overcoming grief and loss. After experiencing loss in childhood, it is apparent that those who can relate are the biggest supporters and advocates. Books, podcasts, TV shows, blogs, and more are outlets for bereaved youth to remember that they aren't alone. The advent of platforms for individuals to share their stories also provides an emotional release and establishes a connection with those who have experienced similar circumstances.

Social media platforms are increasingly aware of the issues associated with grief loss in users and developers are attempting to make online communities more inclusive. Social media is damaging in the process of grief due to the atmosphere of happiness, companionship, and the absence of raw feelings or emotions. However, technology giants like Facebook are acknowledging the implications of social media in regards to the death of a friend, family member, or acquaintance. According to Jessa Lingel, "Currently, Facebook requires proof of death to memorialize a user's page, at which point 'sensitive information' such as status updates are removed, and profile access is restricted to confirmed friends... At Facebook's help center, users can report a deceased user, causing a page to be memorialized, or, if requested by immediate family, deleted." (Lingel, 2013). Opinions about this change are varied, as some appreciate Facebook's gesture to preserve the person's account but avoid sending notifications that may cause emotional distress for the individual's loved ones. On the other hand, some members of the Facebook community see this change as unnerving, "demonstrated by one commenter's claim that 'online identity is a personal estate' and by a user questioning, 'What happens to the digital legacy? ... Very interesting case about ownership of digital identity'" (Lingel, 2013). It is unclear whether Facebook's

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position on the death of users is beneficial due to the variety of individual opinions; however, it is a step in a direction that the rest of society appears blind to.

Social media not only affects grief in regards to the deceased's accounts, but it also changes how we grieve. A major issue contributing to the lack of support for grieving children is that grief is expected to have an expiration date. Once someone dies, the grace period in allowing their family and friends to take time off and emotionally heal is slim. In the presence of social media, grief is no longer a definite period, but it is understood as much more than that. Specifically "in the 1990s researchers began to discuss the need to continue a relationship with the deceased, suggesting that another way to deal with grief is to continue to maintain a tie of some sort with the deceased while accepting that the person is dead" (Kakar and Oberoi, 2016). In this way, social media allows grieving individuals to connect with the deceased and continue to share their memories and legacy. From personal experience, posting on social media reminds others about the death of my mom and encourages them to reach out. For grieving children, the potential for social media to create a community of both those in similar situations and those who can empathize is a positive step in addressing this societal problem.

Celebrities and public figures addressing personal grief experiences provide comfort and initiate the conversation publicly. Last year, CNN reporter Anderson Cooper and comedian Stephen Colbert discussed their experiences with grief on national television. "Mr. Cooper was 10 years old when his father died from a heart attack. Mr. Colbert also was 10 when his father died in a plane crash that also took two of his brothers' lives. Their early losses, both men agreed, shaped their priorities, their worldviews and the adults they ultimately became" (Edelman, 2019). This conversation sparked an interesting point about the lack of resources for adults who experienced childhood bereavement and little access to grief support then, which has continued through their adult lives. Modern society is more accepting regarding mental health issues and emotional distress caused by a variety of realities of life, including grief. Those who lost a parent decades earlier in a less accepting atmosphere face the repercussions of dealing with grief now that was meant to be addressed at the moment. Therefore, it is

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groundbreaking for public figures to start this conversation and remind people that they are not alone. In fact, according to Edelman, “continuing this conversation is more than a dialogical exercise... We need to keep educating one another about the long arc of childhood grief and offering support to everyone along its route” (Edelman, 2019).

Stemming from the discussion of childhood bereavement in the past compared to now and the future, progress proves to be present in how society addresses this issue. This paper references lacking discussion on the subject of childhood grief; however, grief, in general, serves as a taboo topic and is rarely addressed. Though this is the case today, the vulnerability of grief was avoided even more so in the past. Reasons for this are defined by cultural interpretation of grief, where “grief has been constructed as a pathological condition necessitating psychological intervention for people to heal as quickly as possible” (Granek, 2010). Though grief appears in many different shapes and forms depending on an individual and their situation, the discussion around it is marginal. Our capitalistic society is focused on profit, competition, and success, where mental health disorders don’t fall under any of these categories. In the drastically changing current times, this conversation is more accessible but society as a whole must progress towards normalizing mental health struggles before a significant change in addressing and coping with grief will occur.

Similarly, knowledge of grief is increasing as society becomes more aware. A fundamental understanding of grief is necessary to support bereaved children so their lives will function as normally as possible without having to grieve a loss later in life. An understanding that “the process of changing the ideas that we hold about our identity so that they match changes in the outside world is highly emotional and painful, and may take a long time to complete. It is this process which forms the essence of grief” (Archer, 1999). Nowadays, understanding the extent of this process is useful to psychiatrists in supporting grieving children, to parents in understanding what their child is feeling, and to the child experiencing the grief. Acknowledging that one is not alone and that not only will difficult days pass, but there is no

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expiration date to grief are monumental realizations. Continuing to emphasize the importance of studying grief in the future is essential in addressing the societal issues around grief in general.

Impact Gaps:

Overall, the biggest gap in the study and intervention of childhood grief is acceptance. Mental health is avoided in society especially in situations of grief and loss. In order to fully understand the feelings and emotions accompanied with grief, collective regard to those experiencing it is crucial. Institutional acceptance in schools, athletic teams, extracurricular activities, and outside the home would benefit bereaving children. One of the most difficult aspects of childhood grief is the feeling of loneliness in one's experience, but increased awareness and conversation in areas within a child's life would allow this internalized feeling to subside.

Other gaps relevant to this situation include access to resources and help. If one is willing to search for coping mechanisms like podcasts, social media groups, support groups, etc. then circumstances will differ. However, most children won't go out of their way to find these support systems in a time of severe grief. Therefore, access provided to those experiencing grief loss at a young age is beneficial to addressing issues and avoiding succumbed emotional problems resurfacing later in life. The access to these resources starts in the home with increased conversation and check-ins for the child to be comfortable addressing their grief and moving forward in a meaningful way.

Another major gap that's important to address is the lack of information about grief. Research about childhood bereavement is sparse, leading to unknown aspects crucial in understanding this issue. The lack of research regarding effects of childhood bereavement later in life is astonishing. Most institutional reactions to grief assume that the first 1-3 years represent a period of bereavement. However, constraining time frames on grief creates an inaccurate understanding of how individuals grieve a loss. Many may feel intensified grief five or even ten years following their loss, as opposed to the first few months or years. Specifically, "in adulthood, parentally bereaved children experience elevated cortisol activity when faced with daily stressors compared to adults raised by two married and cohabitating

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parents” (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011). This gap is influential to the issue of childhood bereavement and lacks the knowledge to support societal awareness and change.

Key players relevant to this area of study are psychologists, therapists, and those who work one-on-one with grieving children. These people serve as Keystone species in the issue of grief in younger individuals as their work is crucial. Though research and societal understanding of childhood bereavement is slim, therapy and counseling is a beneficial resource in addressing the issue. From my own experience, my family received a year of free counseling through the Hospice program that assisted my mom during her final days. In these sessions, we used art to channel our grief. Though my brother, dad and I are at different ages and paths of life and grief, art connected us to ourselves, our experience, and our loss. Therapists and counselors may take many different approaches when addressing their clients’ grief; regardless, they serve as institutional actors that are influential in assisting those dealing with grief firsthand. Access to these sessions, groups and programs is lacking and will need to improve in order for these situations to impact society and the understanding of grief in general.

There are unique ways for organizations or groups to address childhood grief. One example is music therapy, where groups of bereaving children can play instruments to channel their grief and extend their emotions in a different way. This is beneficial for many reasons, especially “because grief is a complex phenomenon, it is important for grief counselors to recognize the variety of interventions that can be utilized in bereavement care” (Hillard, 2007). Governmental or social organizations could implement interventional resources to support those experiencing grief loss in their youth. Perhaps schools could foster a space for students in these positions to focus on something aside from their grief, like music or art. There is comfort in surrounding oneself with those undergoing similar experiences, and benefits in avoiding the discussion of grief and allowing bereaving children to act normal once in a while. However, funding for these programs is necessary and requires support from institutional areas of society.

Another solution to the gaps discussed begins in the home. Parental support and guidance is crucial in assisting a child grieving. This may seem self explanatory; however, typically parents are grieving the loss in their own way in conjunction with their child. For example, when a child loses a parent, they may experience an emotional detachment to their other parent due to the grief the adult is experiencing as well. In this way, the child may have literally lost one parent and figuratively lose the other. Therefore in the process of coping with personal grief, it is necessary to support the child more than ever. Contrary to popular belief, “healing a child’s grief cannot be rushed, dismissed, or ignored. The belief that you can stop support at any time is false. The child negotiates this difficult process until maturity” (Ciaccio & Ciaccio, 2008). Though it is difficult to attend to a child in the presence of grief, parental support is foundational in avoiding manifestation of negative effects from childhood bereavement later in life.

In researching this issue, I feel more knowledgeable on the topic of grief and I also found comfort in my own suffering. It’s relieving to observe academic studies and find similarities in my experience compared to the experiences of others. I noticed that this topic lacks academic study and I was surprised about how specific research is when it comes to grief. I found a plethora of information about parents losing their children and the grief associated with this and childhood traumatic grief; however, research on the general concept of grief and parental loss was slim. In lecture we discussed how the meaning of portrayal of suffering has changed over time, and these implications apply to the study of childhood bereavement. Specifically, view on grief associated with changing landscapes of sacred and secular understandings. It took time for the understanding that “religious believers grieve deaths and experience death anxiety as intensely as avowed atheists” (Feldman, Fischer, & Gressis, 2016) to surface. Additionally, we discussed in class the ways in which digital media can be helpful when it comes to suffering. Prior to writing this paper, I assumed that social media negatively impacted childhood bereavement. However, my research proved the opposite where social media establishes online communities of those who are experiencing grief in similar ways.

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If I had more time to research, I would delve into this topic in a broader scope. Individual's grief and how it affects their contribution to society is extremely interesting and rarely discussed. Grief comes in a variety of forms due to endless reasons and it would be interesting to understand how and why it occurs. In addition, mental health in general is an interesting topic to study and would be useful in understanding societal interactions and connections.

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