



a daunting challenge (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). One can argue that referring to "family grief" or describing families as grieving oversimplifies the phenomenon and, by default, loses both the complexity and the lack of synchrony in the experience of mutual loss. Attempting to get a sense of the totality of experience of a loss within a family is quite complicated, and the larger the family unit under consideration, the more likely one is to lose vital information, particularly when the information relates to individual family members. In this paper, I explore grief looking "from the inside out," that is, from the perspective of individual family members as they experience a loss in the context of their family.

This paper approaches the topic from a constructivist/interpretive viewpoint. In this, the importance of symbols and the reflexivity of humans are key. Reality is not simply experienced. It requires the active involvement of each person in the construction of meaning, in forming their own interpretation of what is "real" (Feixas, 1990). Schwandt (1994) has summarized the tenets of symbolic interactionism in this way: Individuals act toward their environment on the basis of meanings that are derived, at least in part, from social interaction with others. This process is inherently symbolic, using languages and other symbols and, in the process, creating significant symbols. Finally, these meanings arrived at are established and modified through an interpretive process.

From this perspective, one does not simply experience life; instead, people construct models that help them to understand their past and present experiences and to predict what might happen in the future (Kelly, 1955). These models also are seen as socially constructed (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1994); through interaction with others, one's subjective views are confirmed and given an objective reality that seems to be independent of the social setting (Berger & Luckman, 1966). In a sense, the social surround is used as a tool for confirming one's internally constructed model of reality and the family is an integral part of this social construction of reality.

Attempting to understand the process of grief as it affects and is affected by family dynamics is difficult. In research, intervention, and common thought, grief is conceptualized most often as an individual response to loss with little attention paid to family

processes (Gelcer, 1986; Raphael, 1983; Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). Yet loss and grief are embedded in social and relational contexts (Fowlkes, 1991) and the family is important in both of these. It may, in fact, be that changes in the family resulting from the loss contribute to the intensity of the loss (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). Unfortunately, when attention is paid to the family context, a shift usually is made to looking at the family as a system, and little attention is then given to individual, intrapsychic processes (e.g., Detmer & Lamberti, 1991; Gelcer, 1986; Hirschmann, Gilbert, & Sumwalt, in press). In order to truly understand the nature of grief in families, it is necessary to recognize that both individual and relational factors are operating and that these must be considered simultaneously. Grief within the family, then, consists of the interplay of individual family members grieving in the social and relational context of the family, with each member affecting and being affected by the others.

### **Grief as a Process of Reconceptualization**

Grief and grieving have been defined and refined in any number of ways. In looking at grief within families, I adopt the view that grief is more than a psychological, emotional, or somatic response to a loss. At a deeper, more essential level, it is the reconstruction of a sense of a new "normal" that must be put in place so that the bereaved may have a predictable and orderly world in which to function (Attig, 1991). Grief results from the destruction of the meaning that is drawn from a significant relationship (Fowlkes, 1991; Marris, 1982). The more central the lost relationship was to one's own life, the greater the sense of loss (Bugan, 1983).

Grief also results in the loss of security of knowing that reality can be trusted to be "real" and predictable and understandable (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Following a loss, meaning must be attributed to it in such a way as to allow the griever to regain a sense of order, control, and purpose in life. Accordingly, those aspects of the assumptive world (i.e., the set of assumptions one holds about how life "ought" to be [Parkes, 1972]) that were disrupted by the loss must be reconsidered and reconstructed. With this

reconsideration and reconstruction, the loss is integrated into the new, revised assumptive world. This process is an expansive one, because it grows to include the questioning of assumptions that serve as basis for other beliefs and behaviors along with those that are directly related to the loss (Attig, 1991). The result is some degree of psychological and emotional upheaval (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), which then can lead to disruption of interpersonal and relational processes in the family and other social systems.

### **Families and Social Confirmation of Reality**

In his discussion of the family's role in the construction of reality, Reiss (1981) referred to fundamental beliefs, assumptions, and orientations shared by family members as their family paradigm. He conceptualized this as a system-level phenomenon in which "assumptions are shared by all family members, despite the disagreements, conflicts, and differences that exist in the family" (p. 1). Similarly, family definitions of stressor events (Hill, 1949), family perceptions (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), and the family's world view (Patterson & Garwick, 1994) have been proposed as beliefs held by whole families. Similarly, family grief would be expected to be a grief state that is shared by *all* family members.

Complications arise from this view. If it is true that there are such things as cognitive and feeling states that are experienced by all family members, then we must also assume that if they are *not* experienced by all, either they cannot truly be considered as "family" states or those individuals who do not experience them are not truly family members. How do we know that grief is a total family phenomenon? If grief is more than the outward expression of something that we can only assume is going on (i.e., the reconstruction of the assumptive world), how can one say there is "family" grief? If one family member does not seem to be grieving, is the grief no longer family grief? Or is it still "family," but is the non-griever then no longer "truly family?"

Broderick (1993) has written that "in truth, only an individual can have a belief or value or world view or an understanding of something. Therefore, when we speak of *family* beliefs or understandings, we have committed a serious logical error . . . it ignores

the crucial fact that any group of individuals has as many realities as people” (p. 186), (emphasis in original).

Montgomery and Fewer (1988) have suggested that we confuse individual and family-level properties when we enter the family context. Their premise is that certain properties associated with individuals are found “in” families (e.g., mind, ideas, shame, joy, expectations, perception, identification), while others are associated with families and can be said to be “of” or “by” families (e.g., consensus, working agreement, interaction, harmony, conflict, hierarchy, communication) (p. 27). In their view, grief would be found *in* families, but grieving would not be done *by* families.

In speaking with and, more importantly, listening to marital partners describe their loss experiences, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with the conception of beliefs as a whole family phenomenon. I now take a view that is consistent with those presented immediately above and with the concept of grief as an active process of redefining one’s own sense of reality: *Families do not grieve. Only individuals grieve. This is done in a variety of contexts, one of which is the family.*

Family members may, in fact, grieve together, and they may use one another to test their evolving view of reality, but does that mean that they experience family grief?

Family members coexist in an interactive system of confirmation and disconfirmation of beliefs expressed by each member. Because of their continuing relationship, they attribute meaning to each other’s behavior and then act “as if” that attribution is accurate unless persuaded otherwise. Consistent with the Thomases’ theorem, if something is perceived as real, it becomes real in its effects (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). Family members then act as if their beliefs about each other are accurate until or unless their beliefs are disconfirmed. Because of the “as if” quality of their observations and interactions with others in the family (i.e., behaving as if their basic beliefs are the same), they can function as if they both agree (or agree to disagree) on the meaning of the loss. Behaviors are interpreted, comments are made and assessed, all within the context of each member’s assumptions about how their family relationships should progress. In fact, even though family members may not share a reality in the sense that their thoughts match, their need to believe that they hold a shared

view appears to be strong. An example of this can be found in the tremendous difficulty parents have in accepting that their spouse is grieving in a way that is different from their own (Gilbert & Smart, 1992; Peppers & Knapp, 1980) and attribution of similarities that transcend behavior (Gilbert & Smart, 1992).

It is important to note that the family's involvement in construction of reality is not restricted to a loss situation; it is an ongoing process. Indeed, it is the ongoing, collaborative nature of their construction of reality that serves as the basis for interaction at the time of loss. In their daily interactions family members may consider and validate each other's view of what has happened, is happening, and will happen (Reiss, 1981). As they encounter new information in their environment, they compare and attempt to confirm their beliefs, opinions, hunches, and theories with each other. If family members see their subjective views confirmed by others in the family, these views are given objective reality—i.e., what they perceive comes to be seen as reality because significant others also see it that way (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Fowlkes, 1991; Patterson & Garwick, 1994). If this does not happen, they question their own or the other's perceptions, and formation of an objective reality is made more difficult. It is this historical pattern of the confirmation of reality in families that is brought in to play at the time of loss; its existence may explain why families still at an early stage in their evolution may experience problems following a loss because they have had only limited opportunity to develop such a pattern.

One of the assumptions held by family members may be that because they have lost the same individual their grief should be the same. Alternatively, some may also assume a shared view that their experience of the loss is more significant than that of other family members, or that they have suffered more because of the nature of the relationship they shared with the deceased. They may also believe that the loss was less significant for themselves than for others and feel uncomfortable with the expectation that they should "put on a show of feelings" to accommodate other family members. Finally, because they need to socially confirm the reality of the loss and its impact on their assumptive world, family members may presuppose greater similarity in beliefs within the family than may actually exist.

Mutually validated views of the loss (i.e., shared meaning) facilitate communication, provide structure and meaning to family interactions, and serve as the basis for familial coping behavior (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Reiss, 1981). In the case of loss, the perception that the family holds a shared view serves the purpose of reducing uncertainty about what has been lost, how members are to cope with that loss, and how they are to go on with their lives. In this way, the meaning of a particular death and the individual responses to it are shaped by the system of beliefs within the family.

In a sense, we as researchers and interventionists may inadvertently lend support to the idea that family members, in losing the same person, will experience the same grief. Our use of language may contribute to the reification of this concept. Systems do not grieve. Family members make assumptions about each other that help them to deal with their own grief while at the same time negotiating certain behavioral patterns that facilitate or impede grieving among family members.

### **Differential Grief in Families**

In discussing family response to loss, Bowlby (1980) has suggested that successful completion of the grief process among family members requires above all else that marital partners grieve in tandem. That is, for a successful resolution, both partners must grieve together and provide support and comfort to one another. The logical extension of this view is that all family members should grieve together and provide support and comfort to each other. Yet the reality of grief often conflicts with this desired picture. Dissimilar or incongruent (Peppers & Knapp, 1980) grief appears to be the norm. Rosenblatt and his colleagues (Rosenblatt, Spontgen, Karis, Dahl, Kaiser, and Elde, 1991) indicated that if two people experience a mutual loss, instead of being able to use their mutual experience to be supportive, they are the least likely to be able to help each other. Rather than aiding them to grieve together, the “baggage” of their relationships with each other and with the deceased person may actually impede common grief resolution.

Ultimately, it appears that conflict over expectations of appropriate behavior surrounds grief within the family system. As Gilbert and Smart (1992) found, the expectation that bereaved couples would grieve in the same way actually added to the stress they felt. At the same time, acceptance of the differences inherent in their grief styles and the ability to take a positive view of these differences served to strengthen the couples' marriages.

Thus, within the family, each family member's grief will have its own unique character, informed by the relationship that member had with the person who has died, and its full meaning will need to be processed and worked through (Rando, 1984). The relationship individual grievers have with each other and any emotional legacies they share from the past may contribute to differences among family members (Bowen, 1991). Some may see the loss as devastating; others may see it as distressing; yet others may find it a relief. An additional complication is that, over time, individual members may experience changes in their own interpretation of the loss.

The degree to which family members are able to anticipate and prepare for the death is a factor that can "put family members at different places" in their resolution of the loss especially if the family tendency is to protect each other from "unpleasantness" or pain. Ambiguity about who or what has been lost, whether or not there was a loss, or if it should be seen as a loss can lead to conflict (Boss, 1991; Rosenblatt & Burns, 1986). This can be extended to internal (i.e., within oneself) ambiguity about the loss, particularly if the family member is unable to confirm its reality with others in the family (Gilbert & Smart, 1992). Such ambiguous losses often lead to disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) and may result in grieving individuals feeling stigmatized within their own family (Fowlkes, 1991).

Other factors contribute to different perceptions of the loss. Gender acts as a discriminating factor. Men tend to grieve differently from the traditional expectation of expressive social grief. This traditional image of "healthy grief" was based on what might be referred to as "women's grief" (Cook, 1988). Men are more likely to avoid expressing emotions related to a loss (Frantz, 1984), to be less willing to talk about the loss (DeFrain, 1991) and to

experience less intense grief that is resolved more quickly (Haig, 1990).

The age and/or developmental stage of various family members will affect the ways in which they grieve. Children, for example, will experience recurrent cycles of grief as they move through different developmental stages (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 1994). Children also need a stable world peopled by adults who can be trusted to behave in a predictable way. Intense parental grief may frighten and unnerve children, while children's grief may confuse and frustrate parents and other adults who feel unable to cope with the emotional impact of experiencing a child's grief. The result may be a family where both parents and children hide their true feelings in order to maintain "calm."

Family members may find each other's idiosyncratic grief style difficult to cope with. For couples, in particular, earlier socialization to differences in cultural background will affect each partner's grief style and can affect their relationship (Haig, 1990).

Finally, some family members may find that issues surrounding the loss may *never* be resolved completely (Wortman & Silver, 1989) and episodes of grief may recur many years after the actual loss (Rosenblatt & Burns, 1986).

The end result of all of this will be that a great deal is happening simultaneously, as each family member attempts to come to grips with his or her loss. Intense emotions may be experienced as the reality of a future without the deceased is faced, accepted, integrated into each family member's assumptive world. The interaction of these differences and related conflicts may place tremendous strain on the family (Miles, 1984). Given that family members have only each other's behavior and imperfectly communicated information on which to base their interpretation of each other's grief states, it is not surprising that such conflicts occur.

### **Resolving Grief in a Family Context**

Given that an identical experience of loss is highly unlikely, if not impossible, how can grief be resolved in a family context? After

a loss, how can the surviving family members reclaim their sense of being an intact family?

Jordan (1990) and Walsh and McGoldrick (1991) have suggested that there are three essential tasks of grief resolution in families. In order to carry out these tasks, family members must work to understand what their family and its members need as they redefine "family" and how they will act within the context of this new meaning.

1. There must be *recognition* of the loss and acknowledgment of the unique grief experienced by each member. For this, emotions and thoughts of family members should be shared; at the same time, flexibility and tolerance of differences in grief style can facilitate a sense of acceptance among family members (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). Family rituals can serve an important function in recognizing the loss (Bowen, 1991; Imber-Black, 1991).
2. The loss of a family member disrupts and destabilizes the family; in order that families can continue to function, certain roles must be carried out by its members. Therefore, the family must be *reorganized* after the loss. Family members must reconstruct what family means to them, and their sense of identity as a family (Jordan, 1990). Activities and roles carried out by the deceased must be reassigned or abandoned and the sense of chaos in the family must be reduced (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). In this regard, the sense of family members being "out-of-sync" has great relevance. Family differences can be reframed as strengths rather than weaknesses to facilitate the reduction of this feeling. As above, the use of ritual can facilitate the "passing down" of the roles and the reorganization of the family (Imber-Black, 1991).
3. Finally, there must be *reinvestment* of family members in this new family. Contrary to common thought, this does not mean that the deceased must be "left behind." Rather, the memory of the deceased can be transformed in such a way as to allow family members to move toward the future while maintaining a sense of connection with the

deceased. Again, ritual and ceremony can facilitate this process.

The most essential element in grief resolution in a family is the ability to engage in open and honest communication (Figley, 1983; Gilbert & Smart, 1992; Rando, 1984; Raphael, 1983; Silver & Wortman, 1980). If the loss is to be acknowledged as real and the grief resolution made a collective experience, members must be able to communicate clearly with each other (Broderick, 1993; Jordan, 1990). Supportive communication facilitates the discussion of thoughts and emotions and makes it easier for members to share their beliefs about the loss and its meanings for them (Gilbert & Smart 1992). One crucial element of the communication process that cannot be overlooked is that family members must engage in the simple but difficult act of listening to each other (Gilbert & Smart, 1992).

Sharing certain aspects of the loss is helpful, and this may consist of such activities as family members spending time together or working together to achieve certain goals. Paradoxically, differences among family members must also be allowed and accepted. Rather than striving for a single view of the loss, or promoting a single style of grieving, family members need to come to recognize the similarities in their grieving and to reframe the differences as strengths. As stated earlier, sensitivity to the unique needs of each family member is important. It probably will be necessary for family members who have particularly troubling issues to take advantage of such outside resources as support groups or individual therapy to work out their problems separately from other family members (Gilbert & Smart, 1992).

One of the most distinctive characteristics Gilbert and Smart found in couples who reported very little relational conflict was these partners' positive view of each other and of their relationship. The less positive the view, the greater the depth of their continued grieving and its negative impact on their relationship. Interestingly, many partners found it difficult to maintain a negative view of their spouse and shifted toward a more positive stance. It may well be that family membership who have had a largely positive relationship before the loss will

be predisposed to reorganize positive aspects of their relationship and of each other's behavior, thus allowing them to build positive on positive.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, a family's experience following loss is far more complex than one might at first think, with each family member attempting to come to terms with the loss and its resulting effects on the family as a whole. At the same time, they may be attempting to act as supporters to other family members as they grieve over the loss. Awareness of the variation in intensity of grief and in meaning for individual family members, along with acceptance of differences in grief style, will reduce the extent to which each griever feels disenfranchised or stigmatized in the family. From this, positive family interactions and individual grief resolution can be promoted.

The following summary list includes suggestions for how this can be done:

1. Work with families to help them to understand that individuals will differ in their approach, that the loss will mean different things to each of them, and that family members' grief will be triggered by idiosyncratic phenomena.
2. An essential skill for family members is the ability to reframe each other's behavior, looking for strengths in differences or ways of separating out differences that are difficult to accept from other characteristics that are valued.
3. Respect for differences is important, whether for each member's different methods of processing the loss experience or for all members' periodic need for privacy as they work through the process.
4. The importance of communication within the family cannot be overemphasized. For some family members, it may be necessary to "institutionalize" this communication in some sort of ritual expression.

5. If a common sense of “mission” can be arrived at, it will be easier for the family to reconstitute itself after the loss.
6. Remember that families do not hold beliefs and feelings; only individuals do.

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