Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Survivors: Exploring Clinical Considerations

Learning Objectives

- To identify and understand the psychosocial phenomenon of disenfranchised grief among LGBT bereaved partners
- To identify and describe the diagnostic indicators of disenfranchised grief as it relates to complicated forms of mourning
- To understand effective clinical application in working with disenfranchised grief among bereaved LGBT partners in the context of bereavement counseling or grief therapy
- To understand how to effectively address anticipatory grief concerns for LGBT patients and their partners
Disenfranchised Grief

- Defined as a complicated mourning process of grief that is accompanied by social stigma resulting in the compounded loss of social recognition, validation, and support in relation to the loss experience
- Doka (1989; 1999; 2002) identified three primary forms:
  1. Lack of recognition of the grieved relationship
  2. Lack of recognition of the bereavement experience itself
  3. Lack of recognition of the individual griever

- Includes a significant component of social stigmatization
- Social interpretations are given to qualify the legitimacy of a death or grief experience
- Disenfranchisement: feeling deprived of efficacy and expression, the removal of right or privilege, and a sense of social impotence (familial or institutional structures of culture)
- Social disenfranchisement compounds the psychological stressors of emotional and situational adjustment already present in bereavement
Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals

- DG is not intrinsic to LGBT individuals’ sexual orientation
- LGBT individuals face increased psychological vulnerability to experience DG due to continued social marginalization and stigmatization
- Not all LGBT individuals experience DG; each individual’s grief experience is different
- LGBT individuals face an increased risk for DG due to prevalence of sexual prejudice, heterosexist interpretations about grief and loss, and lack of institutional support (heteronormative culture)

Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals

- Past studies – Gay men and HIV/AIDS
- Current lack of adequate research related to LGBT grief experience of non-AIDS related deaths; tendency to focus on gay men, less research on lesbian and bisexual experience of grief, as well as older LGB individuals
- Murray (2000) – focused on the phenomenon of “stigmatized death”
Disenfranchised Grief, Sexual Minority Status & Psychological Distress

- Significant research confirming correlations between sexual minority status and psychological distress
- Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 1995)
- Sexual stigma (Herek, 1998; 2004): society’s shared negative regard for any non-heterosexual behavior, identity, or expression of relationship or community
- Heterosexism: the cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma, viewing non-heterosexual expressions as inferior
- Sexual prejudice: Prejudiced attitudes and beliefs that are exhibited through discriminatory behaviors towards those that represent a sexual minority status, regardless of orientation
- Many negative effects of sexual prejudice (e.g., internalized homophobia)
Social Psychological Motivations for Sexual Prejudice

- **Stereotyping**: applying one’s own expectations and negative associations about a group to individual representatives of that group
- **Prejudice**: an individual’s negative bias and emotional reactivity about a group as a whole
- **Discrimination**: denying equal treatment of a group based upon stereotypes and prejudices
- Weinberg (1972) argued that there were five predominant reasons for homophobic prejudice:
  - Religious influence, fear of being homosexual, repressed envy, threat to values, and existence without vicarious immorality

Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- Picture of two senior men
- Picture of a senior man in a garden

Narrative accounts specifically focusing on gay widowers; first extensive qualitative study to transcend HIV/AIDS-related bereavement

Account of a gay widower grieving the death of his partner due to brain cancer, while attempting to manage his grief when living a closeted social existence

Focused on the degree of social outness and the risks of developing complications in bereavement

Sherhoff's (1997) research revealed negative reactions of DG that included:

- absence of external social validation (family, co-workers, helping professionals)
- unsympathetic or homophobic responses
- hostility from non-affirming family members
- exclusion from the planning of funeral arrangements

These reactions might result in intensified internalized homophobia or re-traumatization

Highlighted the potential of DG delaying the grief process due the survivor’s defense of the relationship
## Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

### Differences between Bereaved Heterosexual and Gay Men

- Lack of validation for gay widowers’ relationships within heteronormative grief support groups
- Lack of adequate recognition or compensation within gay widowers’ workplace (refusal of FMLA)
- Stereotypes responses towards gay widowers assuming their partner died of AIDS-related causes
- Majority of heterosexual widowers were involved in a faith community and received positive benefits of instrumental and spiritual support
Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- Identified various legal restrictions, interpersonal misconceptions, and discriminatory social attitudes experienced by lesbians and gay men at end-of-life
- Lack of recognized titles (i.e., “husband” or “wife”) further complicated the lack of social validation for caregiving partners
- Simultaneous distress of social disclosure regarding own sexual orientation and nature of relationship
- Research revealed emotional hardship related to both disclosure and nondisclosure in social situations
- Emphasized secondary loss experience of “shunning”

Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- This comparative study revealed that a majority of the bereaved gay and lesbian partners experienced less social support and more disenfranchised grief than their bereaved heterosexual counterparts
- Heterosexual participants demonstrated less worry about possible social stigma
- Research revealed additional emotional distress for grieving LGBT partners due to lack of support from deceased partner’s family and their current coworkers
- Highlighted LGBT survivors’ distrust of institutional support
Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- Correlations between complicated grief and disenfranchised experiences of inadequate validation and support for surviving gay partners
- Identified various thematic stressors for LGBT survivors:
  - Enduring negative heterosexist stereotypes
  - Prejudiced social responses of homophobia
  - Assumption of HIV/AIDS as a cause of the deceased partner’s death.
- Highlighted negative impact of the assumption of HIV/AIDS and its associated disease-stigma

Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- Meta-analysis of existing research related to disenfranchised grief and LGBT experience
- Argued for attention to various cultural factors influencing the bereavement LGBT individuals (i.e., social class, profession, ethnicity)
- Identified the history of institutionalized homophobia and negative medical pathologization of gay men and lesbians as socially established risk factors contributing to the development of complicated or disenfranchised grief
- Concluded that social marginalization and stigmatization are predominant risk factors for DG, not sexual orientation
Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- Focused primarily on the grief experience of older gay men and lesbians – additional social stigma of ageism as compounding stressor
- Factors preventing adequate access to mental health support for DG: anxious concerns about coming out; fear of stigma and discrimination
- Identified history of institutional discrimination, criminalization and sexual prejudice as additional social stressors hindering older LGBT adults from seeking support
- Emphasized the additional emotional distress of both openness and concealment related to one’s sexual orientation

Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- Explored the experience of bereavement for surviving gay widowers grieving the death of a same-sex partner to a non-AIDS-related cause
- Participants discussed “the changing face of HIV/AIDS” and the continued social disease-stigma they felt other people attributed to their bereavement experience
- Participants described the efforts they took to distinguish their partners’ deaths from HIV/AIDS experience
Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Individuals: Previous Research

- Research identified several primary themes of bereavement experience:
  - (a) relationship with him
  - (b) losing him
  - (c) living without him
  - (d) connections with other people
  - (e) moving through loss
  - (f) future romantic relationships, and
  - (g) continuing to live with and without him

Hornjatkevyc & Alderson (2011) research confirmed previous research emphasizing:

- Significant risk for DG and complicated grief when bereaved LGBT partners do not disclose the nature of their relationship with their deceased partner
- Participants’ experience of heterosexuals failing to understand the significance of their relationship with their deceased partner
- Additional psychosocial stressors complicated by unsupportive families: managing post-death affairs (e.g., the need to establish legal protection for themselves), conflicts about the determination of rights to carry out their partner’s final wishes, and disputes over the distribution of their partner’s possessions
Case Study:
Linda

Case Study:
Roger
Implications for Counseling of Bereaved LGBT Individuals

- Creating a safe, empathic, affirming therapeutic/counseling container (working alliance)
- Recognize and attend to the range of diversity challenges and minority experience that might face LGBT clients (e.g., ethnicity, disability, age, spirituality)
- Attend to psychosocial challenges specific to older LGBT adults:
  - history of social stigma and institutional discrimination
  - vulnerability to health problems, physical impairment, social isolation, depression, multiple losses, discriminatory impact of ageism, or sexism for lesbian women
Implications for Counseling of Bereaved LGBT Individuals

- Awareness of the social or familial pressures to live a “heteronormative lifestyle,” contributing to a sense of social invisibility
- If an LGBT client has already negotiated coming out, elicit the specific coping resources he or she utilized during that experience (e.g., self-efficacy)
- Be aware that for older LGBT clients, this might be their first experience of coming out to a professional
- Be aware that older LGBT clients might have experienced multiple deaths related to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (e.g., delayed or residual grief)

Implications for Counseling of Bereaved LGBT Individuals

- Awareness of the multiple layers of minority status and marginalization that might contribute to internalized oppression (e.g., internalized homophobia; internalized sexism)
- Awareness of the likelihood that many LGBT individuals have experienced sexual prejudice through spiritual belief systems or religious institutions (possible lack of coping support)
- Possible vulnerability to self-blame and guilt in relation to their grief, due to previous negative internalizations of social stigma and sexual prejudice (e.g., attribution errors)
- Possible tendency to devalue their relationship due to previous heteronormative pressures that denied its significance
Implications for Counseling of Bereaved LGBT Individuals

- Possible challenges with partners facing death that are at different stages of gender and sexual identity development (e.g., degree of outness; social or familial interpretations and implications of death and dying)
- Therapeutic opportunity for corrective emotional experiencing through validation, affirmation, normalization, and acceptance
- Openness and flexibility is a critical therapeutic posture, allowing for numerous diversity issues to arise that might be a result of disenfranchised grief

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