

Bereavement and Counselling in Bikita District: Cultures Battling for Survival.

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Abstract

Death is an essential end, and it comes when it resolves. This unfortunately does not remove sorrow over the loss of someone. This then calls for consolation from the others who do not experience the same loss at that time. The bereaved persons need support. In the western world, a professional counsellor goes to funerals with the sole purpose of helping the person impacted by loss to cope with it. The counsellor tries to give hope to the bereaved person. It is not rare to find the professional counsellor sitting down with the bereaved giving some counselling. In an African setting, bereavement is carried out by villagers and a counsellor may be irrelevant and even his presence is often ignored. People feel that bereavement is carried out by nearly everyone in the village in one way or another. The main finding is that the villagers have an upper hand in the process of bereavement because they have a long-lasting support system rather than that of the professional counsellor who does his job and goes away. Consequently, the physical support given by villagers is more than the psychological support given by the professional counsellor. At funerals people are observed to spend nights and days with the bereaved and bring food to the family something a counsellor could not do. The study recommends that people's traditional ways of bereavement must be given the same prominence as that of professional counsellors.

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1.0 Introduction

The process of mourning the dead is common in the world and this is the same experience in Bikita. This is sometimes called bereavement. In the United States, where culture appears to change rapidly, and as minority groups continue to grow, these groups' beliefs and customs must be taken into account when examining death, grief, and bereavement (Paul Clement et al July 2003:18-26).

In this reflection bereavement will be discussed mainly in terms of how it is done in Bikita where, like in America, people have their own culture which should be uniquely acknowledged. The phenomenon is common to the world at large. How do these people manifest their bereavement during loss?

2.0 Literature Review

Bereavement is a period of mourning after the loss especially of a dear one (Thesaurus Dictionary), it is a deprivation or loss by force (English Dictionary). In other words, it is a state of sorrow over an unanticipated loss of a loved one, a job, property etc. The concept of sorrow after a calamity has been there even in biblical times. Ruth 1:20 says "Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me." We see the same loss in Job. This sorrow and bereavement where all hope is lost and the people who experience this need comfort. In other words, period of bereavement is a period of experiential paralysis and loss but above all a period of psychological and faith confusion (*Psychology Today*, 1985). Grief is a response to personal loss and it needs others to deal with it. It needs to be accepted by the victim as a journey into new life. The renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud (1917) quoted by Tredeau (2020) in *Mourning and Melancholia: Freud's Thoughts on Loss* says that grief is natural but an individual has to part with the past and accept the present. In the case where grief is caused by death the victim has to look at how to live a new life in the absence of the dear one. This goes together with Freud's developmental stages in which one has to live a stage and accepts a new one without regression. There is need to adjust to the new situation. The Shona people seem to have phrases that denote their concern for the bereaved. This actually means we are together in this sorrow and this is called *kubata mavoko* which means

to “touch the hands of the bereaved”. Another phrase is *kuchema vakafa*. During the high and active period of Covid- 19 the Shona found it difficult *kubata maoko* and the fist became very irrelevant so one had to really shake the hands to show one’s grief and solidarity with the neighbour’s loss. Gloria et al (2007:1) state that grief and bereavement is culturally expressed. It is difficult to give a formula on how it should be done.

Cultural groups in the world are not homogeneous and individual variations must always be considered in situations of death, grief and bereavement (Gloria et al 2007:1)

Stroebe and Schet (1999) look at grief as the process orientation that moves from sorrow to restoration of self. Neimeyer and Sandise (2016) suggest that the idea of meaning as opposed to meaninglessness of life is the main issue in grief. The victim wants to know the new meaning of life and if the victim accepts the situation, then grief provides a possible meaning of this new life (Hall 2014:33(1)7-12).

At times there is anticipatory grief which Aldrich (2012) defines as the grief that is foreseen and anticipated before it occurs. Today, with the coming of the corona virus, one sees grief coming and hopelessly waits for the day. It is a form of grief concept that challenges both the counsellor and the counselee.

Grief at times is more complicated than what has been outlined above. Shear (2016) sees four features in the form of complicated grief: (1). sense of disbelief that the lived one is dead

(2) anger and bitterness over the loss, (3) yearning for the diseased and (4) preoccupation with the past as generated by the current sorrow.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on some theories on bereave. Some of these theories posit that although bereavement is common to humanity there is a difference between cultures on how the concept is handled. The paper will look at the process of bereavement as a battle for cultural survival. One of the causes of bereavement is death and “death is universal, natural, persistent, inescapable, unavoidable and undeniable fact of life.” (Dancy J. and Davis WD (2006: 187-211). Baloyi L, Makobe (1992:232-43). Wiredu K. (2015).

The experience of death is sorrow and it is theorised that such unexpected sorrow is handled differently depending on the culture. The experience of death could be global but how it is handled becomes parochial. Sociologists generally look at death as being in form of dichotomy: expected death and unexpected death. Whatever type of death is experienced, death will create loss and this is followed by bereavement. Dancy and Davis (2006) posit that the process of expected and unexpected death is quite different. In as much as one may accept this, the whole idea of loss affects those who are left behind. A loss is a loss; it impacts the loved ones. Funeral rituals in Africa are ways of dealing with loss at communal level. The “we” philosophy of the African people is realized in this togetherness. It is this communalistic acknowledgement that seems to transcend the process of counselling given by the professional counsellor.

4.0 Methodology

In order to find out how the process of bereavement was taken as a continuous activity of the people and possible role of the counsellor in these activities, the researcher visited bereavement on burial ceremonies and bereavement on (*magadziro*) remembrance ceremonies. These together with personal observation helped the research to get grounded into various types of bereavement. Actually, bereavement among the Shona goes beyond the death day because it is experienced again at remembrance ceremonies (*magadziro*). The researcher visited three death (burial) ceremonies and three remembrance ceremonies. These together with the researcher’s own experiences in these ceremonies formed the findings of the study.

5.0 Findings

This part will look at the various findings the researcher dealt with.

Bereavement among the Shona people is not just psychological. People come to console the person and this is done especially at remembrance ceremonies (*manyaradzo*). This is not the time to cry but console the bereaved. In order to show this type of solidarity people bring food and cooking pots to the bereaved and they do the cooking (very much included. plate 1). The purpose of this is to show the bereaved that the community cares in all areas of loss. The person feels wanted and

this is the essence of counselling in African culture. It is not a counselling of one person by one person but is called group counselling or therapy (Marabella P. 1999, Wicks R 1992, Yallom 1985). Stress in these writers is put on group encounter in dealing with issues. People share not only the sorrows but the food and fundamentally this is the source of traditional counselling. Everybody plays their part in the bereavement counselling. It is different from the western approach where it becomes a private matter. The people spend the whole night at the *nyaradzo* function to assure the bereaved they are at one with each other. This should be called communal counselling because the whole community of men and women share the sorrows of the bereaved. Women play a very important part in the process.

It is important to notice that bereavement is common to all nations but the way it is done differs depending on the culture of the people. Among the Africans this process of consoling is two dimensional; at the funeral and the remembrance ceremony “manyaradzo”. At the funeral what is done is generally very artificial but is meant to alleviate the trauma and the pain from the bereaved. The bereaved is there but numb with sorrow. Even professional counselling does not work. I visited one funeral ceremony and the nurse who was a counsellor indicated that she had no role to play since all was “Chivanhu ceremony,” Traditional ceremony to which only friends and relatives were allowed to see the bereaved. Here one really questions the relevance of Professional Counselling.

The second dimension is “manyaradzo” which literally means ceremony of consolation. It is a celebration not of death but of acceptance of sorrow and arrival of new life for the bereaved. Freud could have accepted this as a healing process of the client.

5.1 The Grave during remembrance (*Magadziro*) Ceremony.

At the “manyaradzo” ceremony there is a combination of traditional and Christian ceremony. The grave of the dead is covered with white cloth which is removed before the priest comes. The later blesses the tomb most of the time not knowing what has aspired (this is more so for the white priest or pastor). The cloth is cut into pieces and the sisters in-law make head scarves (see plate 4). This is again acceptance of a new life the dead will participate with them.

In as much as professional counselling is accepted there is a question of its relevance and ability to fit in these ceremonial activities. This is communal bereavement counselling is common throughout the world. When a person passes on people express their sorrows but this is done differently according to the culture of the people. Bereaving counselling is carried out in the west and other nations differently. There is what Clement (2013) calls cultural perspective and this presumes that each culture has its own ways of expressing sorrow and comforting the bereaved and in the west they call this bereavement counselling. Sigmund Freud published a paper in 1917, just in the wake of World War I, musing on the psychological responses to loss. In this paper, which he called *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud posits that there are two different kinds of responses to loss, called mourning and *melancholia*. He took his theory on this phenomenon from the western system of psychology. Freud describes mourning (which he takes as synonymous to bereavement) as a process which ends up with kind of acceptance, in that the mourner can eventually feel motivated to participate in what Freud describes mourning as a process which ends with a kind of acceptance, in that the mourner can eventually feel motivated to participate in the external world, even though the loss has ultimately changed it. In the western world individual interaction is considered very important and Freud says that maybe it's easier to talk with a therapist about their anger and anxiety than it is with someone they know personally. Either way, by being able to verbalize these immense feelings, and oftentimes past memories with similar feelings, the person can give them specificity, and hold their feelings in perspective (i.e., in the "external world") and the bereaved needed to be consoled and a therapist would journey with the person giving assistance towards recovery.

One of the experiences this counsellor went through was loss of a dear one by death. All the villagers went to the house of bereaved and literally took over the responsibilities of washing, cleaning around cooking and fetching water. Each family brought

food for that occasion of loss which could be called communal bereavement. In the meantime, a counsellor was sitting outside trying to get in the hut to console the bereaved. He realised that in the western system represented by the professional

counsellor was the idea of being with the bereaved but in the African situation it is a communal and group counselling that takes over and not one on one counselling. The most important person at the bereavement time was the pastor who joined the group that was playing a counselling role. The methodology of the west had no relevance and this was the sign that some local methodology was needed and this was “group counselling”. A local funeral organisation (Nyaradzo) seemed to have found a methodology that worked. Nyaradzo Funeral organisation members stayed with the community throughout the night therefore, the organisation was accepted as a member of those who mourned.

The people who participate in the bereavement ceremonies and as a community make a follow up of what happened at least after a year of death or loss experienced. This is no more a time for mourning but one of celebration (plate 2 and 3)

5.2 Argument and Analysis

Bereavement from this reflection was taken from a point of view of sorrow experienced after the death of a member of the family and not bereavement based of loss of property which is a different phenomenon altogether. From the findings, it could be argued that although professional counselling as a form of bereavement and traditional group bereavement appeared to run parallel to one another, the western professional counselling was a mere cosmic exercises. The professional counsellor did not show external sympathy like crying as a sign of commiserating with the bereaved. It could be argued that traditional form of bereavement was found more relevant than professional bereavement as forms of counselling.

6.0 Conclusion

Some questions are raised from these findings: what is the role of the professional counsel in giving bereavement counselling after a loss? What the role of the traditional communal counsellors or consolers in the same ceremony? Are the two systems at variance or are doing the same thing differently?

From the researcher and his point of view, bereavement is common to all cultures. When one is close to an individual who passes on there is some sorrow and people come to give the abeyance to the bereaved person(s). Human nature was created

with a sense of commiseration and such characteristic is common to all cultures. A loss is a loss regardless of the culture in which it takes place.

What the researcher found out was that the methodology of showing sorrow is cultural centred. The counselling methodology as practised by the modern counsellor is a western system and finds itself at loggerheads with the traditional approach and the two appear to be fighting for survival. The modern professional counsellor feels he has an ethical obligation to help the bereaved come to terms with the reality of death and live a new life. The traditional counsellors and their people feel it is not mere coming to terms with self that matters but the reliving of one's life within the community. It is not a mere theoretical approach but a practical methodology that calls the bereaved to continue life in the community. Bereavement among the Shona people was found to be more than a theory and psychological but also a process of meeting the physical needs of the person, (Plate3) The bereaved is called upon to forget the loss and participate in a new socializing system.

The professional counsellor has a role but he still needs to learn the dynamics of African community. What was observed might not auger with modern urban set up therefore it is necessary that the traditions that govern traditional bereavement realise that in areas like growth points and urban set up people are of mixed nature and the wad of assisting the bereaved may need to change. What might be exasperating to the professional counsellor is that he is taken as outsider and is never given significant recognition. From the observations made at these ceremonies in Bikita, the professional counsellor may just sit with other and would never be given the chance to be with bereaved who actually owes all to the community.

Probably one of the weaknesses observed is that the professional counsellor especially a man does not know what to say but simply say "I want see the bereaved." People would never understand the culture of the intruder. At such ceremonies he or she may try to break the gender boundaries but this may be looked at as culturally unacceptable.

From this reflection, one recommends that;

1. Group counselling as a methodology of bereavement be used when there is loss through death among the Shona people of Bikita.
2. Professional counselling of one on one should be given minimum role until enough knowledge of its methods and methodology are understood by the people.
3. The approach used by Nyaradzo could be used. Nyaradzo stays with the bereaved until the whole process of burial is over and this is highly accepted by the people.
4. If ever there is professional counselling to be done, it should be done known local people this is more so in counselling based on gender because it removes unwarranted suspicion from the community.

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