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Bereaved College Students' Experiences with Peer Support

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BEREAVED COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH PEER SUPPORT

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Abstract

Many college students leave college having experienced the death of someone close to them. Research shows grief has both emotional and physical effects on college students, making their time in school challenging. While research on the effects of bereavement on college students exists, research on the support peers offer to bereaved college students during this time remains scarce. The present study sought to gain a deeper understanding of college student bereavement by answering the following research question: What are bereaved college students' experiences with peer support within residence life? Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, the study explored the experiences of eight bereaved students at a small, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. The results showed the important role peers played in providing support to the bereaved individuals. The main themes of the study showed the bereaved individuals' experiences with peer support, the difficulties of grieving on a college campus, and the importance of discussion about grief for bereaved individuals, as well as the increased empathy of bereaved individuals because of their experience with loss. The results of the current study provide higher education professionals with a deeper understanding of the importance of peer support for grieving college students and offer guidance for future interaction with bereaved college students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Death comes as an inevitable experience all must face at some point across the span of life. Whether death happens without warning or expectedly, people feel left behind with a void in their hearts. These individuals become known as "bereaved" and begin a journey to continue life after the death of their loved ones. College students do not escape the pain of grief. According to recent studies, losing a friend or relative remains a common experience for many college students (Balk, 1997; Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Dodd, 1988). These students, left to face the bereavement process, must simultaneously maintain their identity as students, friends, and young adults.

Grief Theories

Bereavement appears different for each individual (Bonanno, 2009; Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008). Many psychologists studied bereavement in order to better understand the process people go through after the death of someone close. Freud (1917/1957) believed   individuals had to work through their grief in order to free themselves from the deceased, creating the idea of grief work. Lindemann (1951) introduced the idea of psychiatric assistance to individuals experiencing bereavement and the many disturbing affects bereavement has on the individual. The bereavement process theory by Stroebe and Schut (1999) identified two coping mechanisms, proposing bereaved individuals oscillate between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping

orientations. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) famously categorized the feelings

many bereaved individuals experience into five stages: "Denial, Anger, Bargaining,

Depression, and Acceptance" (p. 7). Recently, research efforts have addressed more

positive views on the bereavement process, such as resilience and other positive reactions

following death (Bonanno et al., 2002; Bonanno, 2009; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997).

The Bereaved College Student

Bereaved students appear surprisingly prevalent on college campuses; from

personal accounts of loss to empirical studies exploring bereavement, college students

report losing friends, relatives, and immediate family members throughout their time in

college (Balk, 1997; Balk et al., 1998; Balk et al., 2010; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

Recent studies showed about 30% of students are within one year of grieving the loss of a

loved one, with even more students reporting being within two years of experiencing

such a loss (Balk, 1997; Balk et al., 2010). Death may even occur as closely as the dorm

room down the hall, with mortality rates among college students ranging between 4 to 15

deaths for every 10,000 students (Wrenn, 1991 as cited in Balk, 2008). Turner (2011)

studied 157 colleges and found suicide cases and alcohol-related transportation accidents

as the two most common causes of death among university students, further proving that,

at any moment, college students may receive the life-altering news of a friend's death.

College students represent a unique grieving population because of the demand to

balance academic pressure as well as the numerous mental and physical consequences of

grief. Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, and Currier (2008) described bereavement as

"among the most stressful life experiences and transitions experienced by college

students" (p. 37). For example, research has found grieving college students as more

likely to struggle academically (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). After experiencing loss, students find concentrating and studying more difficult and, depending on the relationship to the deceased, may have changes in motivation, test scores, focus, and length of time spent on tests (Silverman, 1987; Walker, Hathcoat, & Noppe, 2012). The effects of bereavement also include both mental and physical consequences. For instance, sleep becomes more difficult after loss and could lead to further problems such as substance abuse (Hardison, Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005). Many students believe grief could cause changes in one's energy, physical appearance, weight, and other physical problems (Vickio, Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990).

The college environment. Culture, not the individual, drives people's feelings and beliefs about death and therefore proves crucial in understanding bereavement (Brabant, Kalich, & Breaux, 2008). The college environment, contributing to college culture, often overlooks the impact of grief on individuals, excluding bereaved students as a result (Balk et al., 1998; LaGrand, 1986). The college environment places priorities on what surrounds students, such as academics and relationships, while naturally excluding bereaved individuals (Silverman, 1987). From high-energy student activities to social floor events, the environment around college students places an emphasis on fun and entertainment (Balk et al., 1998). In this highly relational culture, grieving students often feel on the outside (Silverman, 1987).

Peer interaction. Peer interactions between bereaved and non-bereaved students are paramount to helping college students cope with their grief. Many grief theories mention the importance of interpersonal relationships in handling grief (Bowlby, 1961; Lindemann, 1951). Balk (1997) refers to the attachment theory and coping model by

Bowlby (1961), which uses interpersonal relationships as a way to find attachment outside of oneself. Communicating with peers also provides grieving students a way to measure appropriate emotional behavior and ease the burden of loss (LaGrand, 1986). On average, most college students benefit from interpersonal support after experiencing loss (Balk, 1997). Communication with peers helps grieving students cope with academic pressures and feelings of bereavement (Seah & Wilson, 2011). Peer support therefore can fill the void left from bereavement and provide the grieving individual with opportunities to reflect, move on, and reinforce his or her personal identity (LaGrand, 1986). Thus, peer support proves an essential approach to coping with loss.

Peer perceptions. Research shows peers themselves see the benefit of interpersonal communication as a way to cope with bereavement. Vickio et al. (1990) found non-bereaved students viewed discussing loss as the most beneficial action in supporting the bereaved. Regardless of positive perceptions of peer support among non-bereaved students, most peers do not adequately offer this type of support (Balk, 1997; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Balk et al., 1998). Non-bereaved college students demonstrate lack of concern and knowledge about grief when interacting with bereaved students, showing the connection between personal experience of bereavement and empathy towards grieving peers. Balk (1997) reported non-bereaved students do not have the same understanding of bereavement as students currently experiencing grief. Non-bereaved students often assume the bereavement process as less psychologically invasive and less time-consuming than the bereavement reality (Balk, 1997).

Non-bereaved college students often feel uncomfortable when interacting with bereaved peers. Research asserts discomfort as one of the primary reasons for lack of or inadequate peer support (Balk, 1997; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Balk et al., 1998). Discomfort, sadness, and helplessness prove common emotional responses from non-bereaved students connected to supporting bereaved students (Vickio et al., 1990). Other feelings by non-bereaved college students associated with peer support include lack of obligation, inadequacy, and stress (Balk, 2001). Often, non-bereaved college students visibly show their discomfort during conversations surrounding student bereavement (Balk, 1997).

However, when non-bereaved students attempt to provide adequate and appropriate support to bereaved friends, they often fall short (Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984). Most times, bereaved students perceive "helping" statements communicated by their peers as unhelpful. Other negative responses by students include hurtful statements or avoiding bereaved students, further deepening the bereaved's pain (Silverman, 1987).

Purpose of Study

The current research surrounding bereavement and grief displays the need for a deeper understanding of college student bereavement. Interpersonal relationships have the potential to provide beneficial support, but often peer support proves inadequate or even harmful (Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984; Silverman, 1987). Davidowitz and Myrick (1984) stated the impending need for empathetic individuals who will support bereaved students throughout their time of grief. Morse and Schulze (2013) explained, "Many students are well situated and highly motivated to support their friends in distress, but may lack the confidence and skills to do so" (p. 224). The current study explored

grieving students' experiences with peer support in order to provide an increased awareness of the interaction between bereaved and non-bereaved students. By learning more about grieving students' experiences with peer support within residence life, higher education professionals can provide more beneficial support to bereaved students. By equipping students on college campuses who appear natural helpers, the overall campus environment can become a safe and healthy community "to live, work, and learn" (p. 224). Therefore, based on the prevalence of bereaved individuals on college campuses and the importance of peer support in the bereavement process, the current study explored grieving college students' experiences with peer support, guided by the following question:

How are bereaved college students supported by peers within residence life?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Bereavement and Grief

Bereavement refer to "the objective situation of having lost someone significant through death" (Stroebe et al., 2008, p. 4), further defined as "a life stressor eliciting grief, an emotion" (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 206). Bereaved individuals therefore experience an array of feelings, with grief at the forefront. The term "grief" describes the main emotion one experiences after the death of a loved one (Stroebe et al., 2008). Grief commonly correlates with negative feelings and can affect a person's social interactions, cognitive thinking, and physical well-being (Stroebe et al., 2008). Grief seems experienced and expressed differently based on the bereaved individual, as well as the bereaved's stage in life, culture, and historical era (Stroebe et al., 2008).

Grief Theories

Many theories exist about the process through which one goes after experiencing the death of someone close. Psychologists such as Freud (1917/1957), Bowlby (1961), Stroebe and Schut (1999), and Bonanno (2009) developed theories that influence the way practitioners approach grief today.

Grief work. The idea of grief work proves vital to many theories on bereavement and grief (i.e., Bowlby, 1961; Lindeman, 1951; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). With the attribution of the foundational idea of grief work, Freud (1917/1957) believed people

must go through a process in order to free themselves from their grief. Freud

saw time as the main way to overcome mourning and therefore proposed several ways to

work through one's bereavement: acknowledge the loss, begin to detach from the

deceased, and confront all reminders of this person (e.g., memories). Freud

acknowledged this process as extremely painful but resulting in freedom from one's

grief. Finally, Freud viewed mourning as a normal process that people went through

without requiring the assistance of a medical professional.

Lindemann (1951) affirmed Freud's grief work theory and concluded a person's

ability to effectively do grief work correlated to the time a person spent in grief reaction.

Lindemann concluded that grieving persons experienced five similar groups of

symptoms: "somatic distress, preoccupation with the image of the deceased, guilt, hostile

reactions, loss of patterns of conduct" (p. 189). A hindrance to grief work comes with the

bereaved individual's tendency towards avoidance and need for "proper psychiatric

management" (p. 198). Lindemann believed that psychiatric assistance could save a

person from "prolonged and serious alterations in the patient's social adjustment, as well

as potential medical disease" (p. 198). Lindemann encouraged psychiatrists to engage in

grief work with a patient to achieve psychological freedom from the person who died and

discover new activities that provided satisfying interpersonal interactions.

Recent disagreement has arisen among psychologists regarding the effectiveness

of grief work. In their critique of Freud's grief work theory, Stroebe and Schut (1999)

criticized his focus on the intrapersonal over the interpersonal work of overcoming grief.

They point out the value of interpersonal relationship in the bereavement process:

"Interactions with others can be expected to affect the grieving process and adjustment on both intra- and interpersonal levels" (p. 202).

Other grief theories. While the idea of grief work provides a way to separate oneself from the loss, some theorists believe complete separation does not occur. Bowlby (1961) worked specifically with the idea of attachment and bonds; through his studies, he identified three phases of mourning as a way to comprehend the foundational mental process one goes through when grieving. During the first phase, "Urge to Recover Lost Object," (p. 333) a grieving individual's responds to death instinctually by crying out and reacting in anger, such as the reaction of babies detached from their mother. The second phase of mourning, disorganization, consists of the bereaved individual losing hope in finding the lost object. During the last phase, reorganization, "an effective and loving relationship with the lost person can be built afresh" (p. 337). The person may still continue to seek the lost object but, over time, adjusts to the object's absence. Bowlby (1961) referenced the idea of a continuing bond with the deceased person that allows the bereaved to stay connected with the person lost through memory. This continuation of attachment appears in the 1987 study by Silverman of bereaved college students in which the bereaved individuals did not feel the need to let go of their loved ones but instead learned to accept a new and changed reality.

A newer approach to the bereavement process, the 1999 model by Stroebe and Schut used the work of Freud (1917/1957) and Bowlby (1961), adding a restoration-centered side to grieving. In the model, Stroebe and Schut (1999) focused on two different ways of coping with loss: loss-orientation and restoration-orientation. Loss-orientation coping draws from Freud's (1917/1957) theory of grief-work, concentrating

mainly on working through the facets of one's loss. Restoration-oriented

coping focuses on changes in life by learning to do new activities, avoiding and denying

grief, and adjusting to new relationships, identities, or roles. The defining factor of the

model by Stroebe and Schut (1999) comes with the addition of oscillation between the

two coping orientations; the bereaved can address the loss at times while disregarding the

loss at other times through distraction or focusing on other activities.

Not all grief theories focus on negative emotions. Bonanno (2009) believed

bereavement does not remain confined by stages every grieving individual must go

through; instead, bereaved individuals have followed five trajectories throughout history:

"common grief, chronic grief, chronic depression, improvement during bereavement, and

resilience" (p. 1150). Bonanno (2004/2009; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997) focused most of

his research on the idea of resilience and positive reactions following grief. Based on

available literature on loss and dangerous situations, Bonanno (2004) concluded most

people who encounter these experiences display healthy functioning indicating a course

of resilience.

Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) proposed ine of the most famous theories on

grief in their theory of the five stages of grief: "Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression,

and Acceptance" (p. 7). The stages provide grieving individuals with a "framework" (p.

7) to continue on with life after a loss. The stages do not follow linearly, and individuals

may experience a variety of the stages throughout their time of grief. Kübler-Ross and

Kessler explain increasing one's knowledge of these stages can hopefully increase their

understanding of grief, training bereaved individuals on how to better deal with loss and

life after loss.

The Bereaved College Student

Losing a loved one may happen at any moment in time, and college students cannot escape from this life experience. In fact, research shows they remain likely to experience loss throughout their time in college (Balk, 1997; Balk et al., 2010). According to a study by Balk (1997), 29.4% of the 994 undergraduate students surveyed were within one year of a family member's death and 47.2% within 2 years. When looking at death of friends, 27% of the students reported being within one year of a friend's death, 38% within two years. Overall, more than two-thirds of the students reported losing at least one grandparent throughout their lives, and 60% of the students indicated they had lost a friend. A more recent study conducted by Balk et al. (2010) found similar results, with 30% of the students within one year of a loss of a friend or relative and 39% within two years of such a loss.

Impact of loss. Many students must therefore cope with the physical and mental consequences of bereavement during college. Hardison et al. (2005) found 22% of bereaved students experience insomnia compared to 17% of non-bereaved students. Of bereaved students, the students with insomnia more often had higher complicated grief scores than bereaved students without insomnia. Sleep complications could lead to poor academic performance or increased substance use among bereaved individuals.

Grief often affects students academically in more ways than sleep complications. Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) described death as an event that causes bereaved individuals to re-examine their commitments, possibly resulting in academic difficulties and affecting a student's dedication to the university and academic goals. According to Silverman (1987), bereaved students may struggle to focus and study. Servaty-Seib and

Hamilton (2006) found bereaved students as more likely to have lower grade

point averages than non-bereaved students during the semester they experienced loss.

Degree of relationship may affect a person's academic standings: the closer the bereaved

is to the deceased, the more likely the death affects the bereaved's academics (Walker et

al., 2012). Walker et al. (2012) found a correlation between a student's relationship to

the deceased and the student's change in concentration, motivation, study habits, test

scores, and length time spent on exams.

Vickio et al. (1990) researched students' perceptions of emotions and physical

effects associated with grief. When asked about emotions connected to bereavement,

many students expected the bereaved individual to display a variety of reactions, such as

shock, denial, disbelief, sadness, anger, and guilt. Balk and Vesta (1998) found bereaved

students may deal with feelings of insecurity in identity, confidence, and body image,

particularly if having lost close family members (i.e., parents). Students also perceived

grief to affect one's physical body. Vickio et al. (1990) found many students believed

grief could affect a person's weight, amount of energy, tears, hunger, sleep, physical

appearance, aggression, and could cause headaches.

The college environment. The college environment naturally excludes the

bereaved, often avoiding the continuous and significant effects that bereavement has on

students (LaGrand, 1986). The college environment usually becomes perceived as a fun

place where one can discover new life opportunities and temporarily evade the pressures

of adulthood (Balk et al., 1998). The typical college student focuses on academics,

relationships, and clothes, which often makes the bereaved—focused on loss—feel

separate and out of place (Silverman, 1987). Bereaved college students often feel more

mature because of their loss and feel less concerned with the typical college

worries. Grief therefore does not naturally fit into this environment (Balk et al., 1998).

     According to Oltjenbruns (1996), grieving adolescents often feel aware of other

people's perceptions and afraid of judgment or even rejection. Many people believe

grieving should remain a quick, inward process, and therefore students may feel weak

when asking for support. In such insensitive settings, students may feel urgency to work

through grief and return to "normal" as soon and privately as possible (Silverman, 1987).

     Finding support after a loss looks different for a grieving college student than for

the average grieving individual. LaGrand (1986) emphasized the college community's

indifference to the important, ongoing effects of bereavement on students. According to

Balk (1997), family support often becomes less accessible during one's college years, and

the campus environment emphasizes peer communication and relationships. Thus,

without family and ostracized from peers, the bereaved feel more alone and struggle to

uphold personal relationships (Balk, 1997).

     Most grieving individuals find limited opportunities to talk about their grief

within the college environment (Balk, 1997). Balk (1997) explained grieving students

"find few, if any, persons in the university willing to discuss the death, to acknowledge

the importance of this event in the student's life, or to recognize the significance for the

griever of the person who died" (p. 218). Though many students feel discouraged from

sharing their grief, they would more openly talk to a concerned peer than seek

professional help. Balk (2008) therefore highlighted the importance of training college

students to appropriately support peers in the bereavement process.

Students perceive grief affecting relationships in some capacity, according to a study by Vickio et al. (1990) in which 28.7% of the students surveyed said grief would either add to or take away from intimacy with other people. Nineteen percent of students believed grief would enhance the bereaved person's relationships while 23% believed grief would have negative effects on relationships. Approximately 14% of students said they would not be shocked to find grief affected a person's relationships in *any* way.

Ways of coping. With college as a difficult environment in which to grieve, students' coping strategies become unique and varied. A study by Vickio et al. (1990) revealed most students realized absolute recovery from grief does not happen quickly, with 22.7% of students believing one would never recover from grief. The majority of students do not understand the length and depth of grief until personally experiencing loss (Balk, 1997). Balk (1997) found most students report grief as more difficult, take more time, and evoke deeper sadness than previously expected.

Seah and Wilson (2011) found bereaved students used different strategies to manage the tension between academic demands and grief: meaning making, learning the benefits of grief, taking up a positive attitude, setting reasonable expectations for recovery, actively participating, resting, communicating feelings, asking people for support and assistance, maturing spiritually, and growing in understanding and ability. Balk (1997) reported similar coping mechanisms used by bereaved students such as reminiscing on positive qualities of the deceased, crying, conversing about the loss, thinking the deceased is in a better place, pursuing a busy schedule, and participating in

spiritual activities. Denying all feelings can become another way to deal with

loss. Silverman (1987) found students used numbness to slowly face the reality of their

loss.

Peer support as a coping mechanism. Interpersonal relationships play a key role

in coping with loss (Balk, 1997; Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990; Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984;

LaGrand, 1986; Ott, 2003; Seah & Wilson, 2011; Vickio et al., 1990). Balk (1997)

connected the attachment theory and coping model by Bowlby (1961) to interpersonal

communication as a way to continue friendships, which, in turn, attaches oneself to the

outside world. LaGrand (1986) highlighted the benefits of social support systems,

describing them as a way for bereaved individuals to "gauge *acceptance* of emotional

behavior" and "unburden one's self" (p. 50). Social supports therefore may "act as a

replacement for severed relationships," (p. 50) provide inspiration to continue with life,

offer motivation to reflect on memories of the deceased, and reinforce a person's identity.

In further evidence of the importance of interpersonal support, Davidowitz and

Myrick (1984) proposed "potential helpers" (p. 9) exist all around and can talk with the

bereaved about their loss. Davidowitz and Myrick (1984) explained individuals "need

timely help from caring persons who will encourage them to talk about their painful

experiences" (p. 9). Therefore, discussing one's grief becomes a key way to handle loss

(LaGrand, 1986). Vickio et al. (1990) found 31.5% of students found conversing with

other people the most helpful coping mechanism when dealing with loss. Vickio et al.

(1990) also reported consolation and help from other people and simply socializing with

other people as other important ways of coping mentioned by students.

The effectiveness of interpersonal relationships as support to the bereaved college student extends beyond theory; research proved peer support quite beneficial. According to Balk (1997), grieving college students on average benefited from discussing their loss with someone. Similarly, Seah and Wilson (2011) found talking to other people allowed grieving students to cope with the demands of schoolwork and bereavement. Non-bereaved college students viewed discussing the loss as the most helpful action to support bereaved individuals (Vickio et al., 1990). Balk (1997) discovered 86.4% of students reported discussing the death as somewhat if not very helpful in caring for the bereaved.

Peer perceptions. Despite the benefit of talking to peers, most non-bereaved students do not readily provide this type of support. Non-bereaved college students show lack of concern and knowledge regarding bereavement when around grieving students, their empathy for the bereaved clearly limited by the fact that they have not experienced such loss themselves (Balk, 1997). Similarly, Ott (2003) found individuals identified as having complicated grief more often reported feeling less supported socially than individuals without complicated grief. Unlike Balk (1997), Vickio et al. (1990) found most students could identify helpful actions—such as listening, conversing with the bereaved, and providing consolation and support—when interacting with the bereaved.

Discomfort seems to become a main reason for lack of peer support among undergraduate students (Balk, 1997; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Balk et al., 1998). The primary reasons for not supporting peers, according to Balk (2001), involve feeling of inadequacy, lack of obligation, and stress caused by the interactions. Vickio et al. (1990) researched students' emotions when interacting with grieving individuals; about 70% of

students mentioned sadness as the most common emotional response, followed

by 31.7% experiencing helplessness, and 13.8% feeling discomfort. Similarly, Balk

(1997) found many individuals showed signs of discomfort during conversations about

student bereavement. Vickio et al. (1990) suggested students could recognize their own

inevitable death when interacting with grieving friends and therefore feel uncomfortable.

Peer interaction. Even when peers do get involved, they often prove

unsuccessful in providing adequate and appropriate support (Davidowitz & Myrick,

1984). Davidowitz and Myrick (1984) researched peoples' responses to grieving

individuals, specifically looking at "helping" statements. Out of 158 statements gathered,

the bereaved saw 20% of the responses as helpful, while they considered 80% unhelpful.

Silverman (1987) found students often responded negatively to the bereaved with phrases

such as "You'll get over it" (p. 395) or by avoiding the person altogether. Balk (1997)

noticed peers' expectations of the bereavement process differed from the bereaved

students' experiences with peers. Non-bereaved students expected the bereavement

process to be less intrusive emotionally and require less time and effort than the actual

experiences of the bereaved (Balk, 1997).

Many students leave college having experienced the loss of a close relative or

friend (Balk, 1997; Balk et al., 2010). Bereavement for college students proves

especially difficult because of the mental and physical effects of grief, academic

demands, college environment, and social interactions with peers (Balk, 1997; Balk &

Vesta, 1998; Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990; Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984; Hardison et al.,

2005; LaGrand, 1986; Neimeyer et al., 2008; Oltjenbruns, 1996; Servaty-Seib &

Hamilton, 2006, Silverman, 1987; Vickio et al., 1990; Walker et al., 2012). Often, peers

feel uncomfortable around their bereaved friends and do not provide adequate

support (Balk, 1997; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Balk et al., 1998; Davidowitz & Myrick,

1984). The current study addressed the specific needs of this unique grieving population

by looking at the support peers provide during the bereavement process.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Phenomenological Research

In order to understand grieving college students' experiences with peer support, the researcher used a phenomenological research. A phenomenological research design looks at each person's experiences and finds the commonality within the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Van Manen (1990) described phenomenological human science as "the study of lived or existential meanings; it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness" (p. 11). This type of research offers a way to develop deeper knowledge of the different facets of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, by using a phenomenological design, the researcher explored the experiences of grieving college students with peer support and identified common elements within the phenomenon of college student bereavement.

Participants

The study took place at a private, liberal arts, faith-based institution located in the Midwest. The researcher used purposive sampling in order to choose possible participants who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Krueger, 1988, p. 150). The researcher selected participants above the age of 18 and currently enrolled at the institution. Participant selection also involved the following criteria: (a) all participants experienced the death of a close friend or relative during the

academic school year, (b) time between participants' loss of friends or relatives

was between three months to three years, allowing time for bereaved individuals to have

time to process the death, and (c) all participants lived in the residence halls during their

bereavement experience. One participant did not meet the above inclusion criteria

because her father passed away during the summer, but she remained in the study

because she continued to experience grief from her loss the following school year.

The researcher identified possible participants using the institution's Dean of

Students Office, including references from the Counseling Center and Residence Life

Staff. The researcher contacted all possible participants through email, explaining the

purpose of the study and requesting participation. The initial email contained the consent

form, providing potential participants with information regarding the sensitive nature of

the study, potential risks involved in participation, and contact information of the

institution's counseling center. A total of ten students received the initial email, with a

few students responding. The researcher sent another email with more students agreeing

to participate. In total, eight students participated in the study: five females and three

males (four seniors and four sophomores). The time between experiencing the death of a

loved one and the time of the interviews ranged from 7 months to about 2.5 years. Six

participants had experienced the death of a loved one less than two years ago. The

relationships to the deceased included grandparent, sibling, friend, and parent. All

participants identified as Caucasian.

Procedure

Eight individuals participated in this study. The researcher interviewed each

participant for approximately 50 minutes and asked 6 semi-structured questions with

follow-up questions. The questions explored participants' experiences with bereavement and peer support within residence life. Using semi-structured questions allowed the researcher to adapt to the flow of conversation while upholding the interview protocol and to further understand the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2008). The researcher conducted a pilot interview to test the interview questions, making adaption to the questions as needed.

Confidentiality remained a priority throughout the entire research process. The researcher recorded every interview and kept the recorded data in a secure location only accessible by the researcher. All participants received numerical pseudonyms to further maintain confidentiality. The interviews took place in a private, comfortable conference room located on campus. Given the highly emotional nature of the topic of bereavement, the researcher conducted each interview with sensitivity and empathy. The researcher worked closely with the counseling center, notifying them of the study. Participants received invitations to connect with the institution's counseling center after interviewing.

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed and coded each interview, identifying several themes based on the codes from the transcribed data (Creswell, 2008). This process allowed the researcher to understand the commonality between each individual's experiences, providing deeper insight into the phenomenon of grief (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used a member checking process to ensure validity of the study. The researcher sent the found results to each participant, asking the participants to confirm the accuracy of the information gathered as well as verify if the "description is complete and realistic, if the themes are accurate to include, and if interpretations are fair and representative"

(Creswell, 2008, p. 267). To further maintain accuracy of the identified results, two people analyzed the recognized themes. Through the data analysis process, the researcher explored the phenomenon of grieving college students' interactions with peer support and identified major themes to understand college student bereavement and the type of support available.

Benefits

Through the present study, the researcher addressed the phenomenon of college student bereavement, specifically participants' interactions with their peers. As a result of the study, higher education professionals can have a greater understanding of how to support grieving students' through the bereavement process, particularly within the residence halls where peer interaction is paramount. The study can equip institutions to evaluate the current support available for bereaved college students and provide valuable information on the roles peers play in the bereavement process. Institutions can use the research in the present study to equip students to support bereaved peers, hopefully lessening the physical and emotional effects of grief on these bereaved students.

Chapter 4

Results

The current study sought to learn more about grieving college students'
experiences with peer support within residence life. Through the coding process, four
main themes emerged: the environment, the peer support, the discussion, and the
experienced griever. Each theme consists of several sub-themes that help provide greater
context and understanding of the main themes.

Theme 1: The Peer Support

The current study found peer support majorly contributed to the participants'
experiences with bereavement support and therefore represents the overarching theme of
the study. All eight participants received support in one way or another following their
loss, but support varied for each participant. Participant feedback regarding support
received mainly centered on three subthemes: the relationship to the bereaved, the
intention behind the support given, and the unhelpful support received.

  Sub-theme: Relationship to the bereaved. The relationship the bereaved
individual had with the person trying to provide support majorly influenced the
effectiveness of the support given. When asked about the helpful support they received
during their experience, six participants told stories about their close friends as the
primary givers of support. Two participants explained their close friends served as the
ones to tell other people about the death that had occurred, sparing the bereaved

individual the pain of repeatedly telling what had happened. Close friends

offered a space where the grieving individual could do what he or she needed to do while

grieving. Examples included talking, listening, sitting in silence, letting the bereaved cry,

holding the bereaved, saying encouraging words, and respecting the bereaved

individual's space. Participant 8's friends said they would do "literally anything" he

needed.

On the flip side, when a previous relationship did not exist before the death, the

peer support was not always received well. Several participants related experiences they

had with peers offering support without knowing them well. Participant 7 described the

questioning from his peers he did not know well as, "nice to some extent but then there

were some points where it was overwhelming. I was like ok, like I'm all right – just give

me some space. I don't even know you." Participant 3 explained how she felt frustrated

by people she did not know well asking her questions about her grandpa when, if her

grandpa had not died, she would not have wanted to share that information with them

anyway. Several participants mentioned how their peers did not understand the

relationship they had with the deceased, and this lack of understanding led to feelings of

frustration or confusion. In contrast to losing a loved one no one else at school knew,

Participant 8 lost a close friend who lived on his floor. He recognized the importance of

having people around him who knew him and knew the situation and felt like he had

space to grieve since everyone else on his floor grieved as well. He said,

> I had friends on the floor who all knew him and who all knew me so it was—that
>
> was helpful cause I could if I needed to talk to anyone I could literally talk to
>
> anyone. They all understood what was going on . . .

Sub-theme: Authenticity of peer support intentions. While not necessarily following a particular pattern, the benefit of support offered depended predominantly on the intentions of the supporter. Participant 7 summarized this sentiment well: "It is less an emphasis on what you say but more on how you say it." Several participants mentioned how they could tell if the support offered to them came genuinely or obligatorily. If support came genuinely, the participant would often receive the support as helpful. If the person seemed to offer support out of guilt or obligation, the bereaved most likely perceived the support as unhelpful.

Several participants mentioned the follow-through of supporters as indication of care authenticity. For example, Participant 2 found it helpful when her friends followed through by not just saying they prayed for her but also texting her while she left campus for her grandpa's funeral to see how she felt. Participant 1 noted authenticity when peers offered continued support—"not just being there when everything was falling apart."

Several participants mentioned their frustration with peers offering noncommittal or inauthentic support, such as, "If you need anything, let me know." Participant 7 explained he perceived this response as "taking the responsibility off" of the person offering the support and placing it on the bereaved individual; this participant also mentioned the response "praying for you" as "sort of like a greeting. It is like 'see you later' . . . like do you really mean it or is it just like something you say to like show someone ok let's move on from this topic of conversation." Participant 2 explained she would have rather people say "I'm sorry" and not extend an offer to help her if they did not plan to follow through.

Sub-theme: Resident assistants. Resident assistants also played a role in the peer support bereaved individuals received. Participants reported both helpful and unhelpful support from their resident assistants during their time of grief. Most participants recounted times they discussed their grief with one or more of their resident assistants—with several participants explaining they already felt close to the resident assistants who offered beneficial support. Two participants explained their resident assistant provided a supportive presence, offering support without talking. Several resident assistants did not provide support. Participant 6 explained, "My [resident assistants] never talked to me. Um they never approached me at all . . . they just didn't want to say something to me or didn't want to say anything to upset me." Two participants mentioned the busyness of their resident assistants as a reason for the lack of support they felt from them.

Sub-theme: Additional unhelpful support. Seven participants mentioned other common forms of unhelpful peer support, such as cliché responses, hurtful jokes, and prying questions. Participants repeatedly expressed their frustration with peers saying empty phrases such as, "I am praying for you" or "I know what you are going through." Participants felt especially sensitive to jokes or sarcastic comments made by their peers. Two participants recounted hearing their peers make jokes about death. For example, Participant 1 explained, "But people will say . . . 'Well my mom's dead' and she's not actually. And it is just like 'That is not funny.' Some of us—that is a reality." Participant 1 felt particularly sensitive to sarcastic comments. During a time when she had a hard time attending classes because of her grief, she experienced comments from her friends such as "Hey, look who showed up to class today."

Five participants felt frustrated by the type of questioning they underwent from their peers, especially the peers they did not necessarily feel close to. Participant 3 explained her peers' questioning only caused more internal questioning. Participant 7 expressed his frustration with his peers going too far with their questioning:

What I didn't like was when people sort of pried it out of me like, "How does that make you feel?" and like stuff like that—I was like, "Maybe I don't really want to talk about how I feel right now. Maybe that feels a little invasive."

Theme 2: The College Environment

The unique environment that a college campus provided for the bereaved emerged as the second theme from the data. Seven participants mentioned how the unique environment of a college campus made their grieving more difficult, particularly because of the amount of people, their identity that formed because of the grief, feelings of isolation, and the academic pressure they felt.

Sub-theme: Number of people on campus. Four participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed or frustrated by the number of people present on campus. Whether transitioning from operating solely around family to suddenly 2,000 people or receiving certain responses from peers, the large number of people surrounding the bereaved during this time contributed to their experience. Participant 3 described it as living in "such close quarters with people." She explained that there existed only a few places to discuss grief on a college campus and the dining commons did not serve as one of them. Several participants mentioned how they did not have a choice of when or who they talked to about their grief, which often led to unwanted conversations or further questioning. A

few participants used close friends or social media as communication channels so as to not have to repeatedly explain the cause of their grief.

Several participants recounted the difficulties of grieving away from home. A few participants felt the stress and grief of their relatives but had to stay at school. Two participants noted the difference of grieving in a residence hall instead of grieving at home. Participant 3 explained, "So like you deal with things completely different when you are with family—so many years of knowing—then you get thrown into a residence hall with like 300 girls."

Sub-theme: Isolation. Several participants described their experiences with feeling alone while grieving on a college campus. Participant 3 explained thinking about how she was probably the only one on campus who had someone close to her die that day. Everyone around her went on with their normal life, but her reality differed.

Several participants expressed their desire for alone time. Two participants explained how having a roommate affected their ability to freely grieve. Participant 7 did not know his roommate when his grandpa died and therefore did not feel like he had space to find solitude. Participant 5 did not have a roommate during the semester when she lost her brother, allowing her to have the space to cry at night. The following semester, however, she felt uncomfortable crying in her room because she did not want to "burden" her roommate. Participant 1 actually chose to come back to school because she felt the environment gave her both the option to engage with people or find solitude.

Sub-theme: Burdening others. Four participants feared burdening their peers with their grief. Participant 3 did not want to put pressure on other people to "feel her emotions" and worrying about her grief "affecting them." She also felt like she needed to

affirm her peers in the way they consoled her. Because she did not know how

to receive support during this time, she chose to isolate herself as to not make her peers

feel bad—further evidence of the isolation sub-theme. Participant 7 gauged how the

conversation went with his peers, and, if he perceived it as getting too depressing, he

moved on from the subject. Participant 8, who lost his friend who also lived on campus,

would not talk about certain things with his other friends for fear of bringing back their

grief.

 Sub-theme: Identity. Four participants expressed concern over how their peers

would perceive them because of the loss they had experienced. Participant 3 expressed

her frustration with her peers looking at her differently because her grandpa had died. She

explained, "I'm still the [person] that I was 5 seconds before you knew that." When

Participant 5 came back to school, she felt everyone looked at her and identified her as

the girl who lost her brother. She even received messages from people she did not know

offering condolences. She explained,

> I was really scared that people were going to feel sorry for me and that is like
>
> another thing—I felt like all eyes are on me and all of them are like oh that girl
>
> lost her brother. Poor thing . . . But I didn't want tension.

> Others felt concerned with how to maintain an identity of strength despite the

crippling loss. For example, Participant 1 explained she did not want other people to

think that the grief would take over her life, but she felt unable to function normally.

Participant 8 said that he felt pressure from himself to move on from his grief because he

did not want other people to think of him as weak or the as a perpetually sad person.

Sub-theme: Academics. Six participants discussed how their time of grief affected their academics. Several participants who experienced their bereavement during their freshmen year explained their uncertainty of how professors reacted to them asking for extensions or skipping certain required events. Maintaining coursework and attending class caused struggles for several participants. Participant 3 reported,

> I don't know that there is an ideal environment to grieve, but classroom is not the best place . . . right after he died one of my first thoughts was, like, "What am I going to have to make up and, like, homework-wise?" Just cause I want to be home and I don't want to have to deal with making up work because I'm going through an event in life.

Overall, the participants felt professors seemed understanding during their time of grief, allowing them to miss class and make up assignments.

Theme 3: The Discussion

As the third main theme that emerged from the data, discussing grief played an important role in participants' lives, resulting in both benefits and disadvantages. Participants talked about the comfort level of themselves and others in discussing grief and the benefits discussion allowed.

Sub-theme: Comfort level. Several protocol questions centered on people's comfort in discussing grief. The comfort level of peers varied among participants. Participant 2 explained peers seemed "really willing to talk and listen." In contrast, Participant 6 had an especially difficult time with peers. She wished they had asked her questions but instead felt like they seemed too afraid to discuss her grief. She explained,

But there were a lot of other people that I was fairly close to that they just didn't know how to address the situation. So they would ask how I was doing but it was nothing – they just kind of avoided it. So I think there were a lot more discussions that I felt should have taken place and it just didn't.

Several participants mentioned the importance of discussing grief in a small group setting instead of in a large group. This environment allowed the person grieving to open up and feel more comfortable.

Sub-theme: Benefits of discussion. When articulating benefits of discussing grief, three participants explained discussing their grief allowed them to process what had happened in a healthy way. Participant 7 said, "So, it was good to say it out loud instead of just playing it in my mind where I knew it was true. But to hear myself say it was like affirming truth." Participant 8, when giving advice to others experiencing grief, said that talking about the grief allows a person to

> . . . just kind of get those thoughts out of your head cause if you keep them in your head, that is when they get twisted and that is when you just get angry so being able to talk about it is the best way to process through it. Cause then you bring someone else in and it's not just you . . .

Several participants told stories of the deceased as a way to process through their grief. Participant 5 found comfort in discussing memories of her brother with a friend who had experienced a similar loss. Several participants also discussed the importance for peers to understand the need for balance in conversation—allowing the bereaved individuals time to discuss other topics as well as their grief.

Theme 4: The Experienced Griever

The final theme showed all eight participants have a greater understanding of grief and how to offer support to other bereaved individuals in the future. Four sub-themes emerged surrounding participants' future interactions with bereaved individuals: an increased understanding of grief, increased understanding of helpful support, opportunities to offer support, and offering advice about the bereavement process.

Sub-theme: Increased understanding of grief and support. All participants displayed a greater understanding of grief and empathy because of their personal experience with losing loved ones, with five participants explicitly stating this deeper understanding. Participant 3 explained, "I think I would have just been like everyone else had I not been through this and now I feel like I have like comfort to offer if they want to." Participant 4 expressed his ability to "enter into the conversation by knowing what it is like to hurt. Not necessarily what they are feeling in that moment but at least knowing like what is going on."

Because of their experience, five participants also displayed a greater awareness of how to provide helpful support to other bereaved individuals. Participant 4 explained,

I know what I needed to be comforted by or what I needed to feel comfort. That is different with everybody but at least being able to walk into that situation and realize that there is something they need to have some sort of comfort and trying to figure out what that looks like.

Sub-theme: Supporting others and offering advice. Seven participants referenced specific ways they have extended support to other people going through hard times. Whether giving a book that provided them comfort or explaining their personal

experience with how their grief process went, participants came alongside their

bereaved friends to help them with their pain. Participant 8 related,

> So I was able to talk her kind of through that and just kind of be like "here is what
>
> to expect in the next year or so"… I was able to open up and share and so was
>
> she… I was able to help someone else through their grieving period.

Two participants received help from other experienced grievers during their bereavement

experience, further showing the support grieving individuals can offer to others.

When asked how they would interact with and support grieving individuals in the

future, five participants offered advice of how to walk through their grief. Participant 3

said she felt like the person people went to for advice about grief on her wing. She

explained,

> Just like being able to offer that advice. Um not at all that I'm an expert but
>
> having - you kind of feel like an expert just because there's not enough people –
>
> not that I want everyone to be like as proficient at grieving as I am, but when
>
> there is like a limited number of people in a specific wing that have dealt with that
>
> – you kind of do feel like – oh point person – for death – right here!

In describing the advice they would offer to grievers, a few participants mentioned the

importance of giving oneself space and grieving in the way one wishes to and not

necessarily the way others prescribe.

Conclusion

Overall, the themes that emerged from the data showed the difficulty bereaved

college students face and the importance of peer support during their bereavement

experience. The close friends of the participants played instrumental roles in providing

beneficial support and opportunities for the bereaved individuals to talk about

their grief. Therefore, the support offered by peers—especially close friends—

represented the overarching theme in the current study and characterized the very essence

of the phenomenon of college student bereavement. The study also found the unique

environment of a college campus contributed to the bereaved individuals' experience as

well. Lastly, experiencing grief allowed the participants to understand how to help their

grieving peers in the future. The following discussion explores the connection between

relevant literature on college student bereavement and the findings in the study.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The current study sought to understand the phenomenon of college student bereavement by answering the following question: What are bereaved college students' experiences with peer support within residence life? The following four main themes emerged from the data: the peer support bereaved individuals received, the unique college environment for bereaved individuals, the benefits of discussing their grief, and how the bereaved used their grieving experiences. The section below explores each theme and how the findings connect to previous research on college student bereavement.

The Peer Support

The primary finding of the current study centered on the support peers offer to the bereaved participants during their grief-loss experience. Davidowitz and Myrick (1984) highlighted the need for grieving persons to have considerate individuals in their lives to help them discuss their loss. In the current study, the relationship bereaved individuals had with their peers seemed to determine the extent to which the peer support benefited the bereaved. The bereaved's close friends seemed to serve as the most helpful individuals. Six of the eight participants noted their close friends provided the majority of beneficial support. Even though close friends did not always know how to provide comfort, they had a deeper understanding of their bereaved friends and willingly provided support in whatever way needed.

Current literature highlighted interpersonal relationships as instrumental

in coping with loss (Balk, 1997; Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990; Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984;

LaGrand, 1986; Ott, 2003; Seah & Wilson, 2011; Vickio et al., 1990). Most participants

in the present study found at least a few peers who provided helpful support. The current

study also found the most helpful support often came from individuals who offered

authentic support. What a person said to provide support did not seem to matter as much

as the intention behind the words of support. Participant 1 explained the importance of

having peers who will continue to support her in the future. She said, "The follow up of

saying, 'Hey, how is this year going?'… And just like that kind of following up and

trying – not just being there when it seems like everything is falling apart." When peers

followed through on their verbal support, the participants in the study felt particularly

supported.

Research also revealed a significant lack of support or unhelpful support for

grieving college students (Balk, 1997; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Balk et al., 1998). All

participants recounted insensitive or unhelpful support from their peers during their time

of grief. Participant 6 had an especially challenging experience with the lack of peer

support. She explained,

> I think I should have been able to have more discussion with my peers that just
>
> didn't happen because some people didn't know how to react. People didn't
>
> know how to start a conversation with me about it . . . and so it kind of made
>
> things difficult.

Overall, most participants in the current study felt supported by their peers in one way or another, adding a more hopeful addition to previous literature on college student bereavement.

The College Environment

The second main theme stemmed from the unique college environment. Balk et al. (1998) explained the common perception of the college environment as a place where people can escape the responsibilities of adult life and pursue fun activities, therefore often proving difficult for bereaved individuals. The current study found similar results, with several participants mentioning the tension they felt between experiencing grief and living in an environment that focused on entertaining events and social interactions. Participant 2 explained, "I think that sometimes it was like hard not to want to do something super fun or be super happy." Similarly, Participant 7 felt pressure to engage in freshman activities during orientation weekend even while experiencing grief.

The current study also found bereaved college students felt concerned about how others would perceive them during their time of grief. Oltjenbruns (1996) found grieving individuals can fear the judgment or rejection of their peers during their time of grief. Whether feeling concerned about looking weak or afraid of their loss becoming their main identifying factor, several participants in the current study tried to maintain a strong appearance during their grieving experience. Participant 1 explained, "I also didn't want to be perceived as someone… who let the grief run my life."

Connected to the fear of how their peers would perceive them, many participants worried their grief would negatively affect their peers. Oltjenbruns (1996) explained grieving individuals might fear that asking for support during grief indicates weakness.

Four participants in the present study feared burdening their peers with their grief. During a time when most individuals would become self-absorbed with their own grief, many participants acknowledged the effect their own grief could have on their peers. Participant 5 explained, "I just always felt like I would be burdening them. So I didn't want to talk about it a lot." Participant 3 explained the responsibility she felt to affirm her peers in the way they supported her, which led her to isolating behavior. She described "wanting to be alone cause I don't want to have to make them feel better about what they are doing. Which I know is not my responsibility but that is who I am." The fear of grief affecting others adds another complicated layer to the bereavement process through which bereaved students must navigate. These examples, parallel to prior research, show the difficulty bereaved college students face while living in an environment that tends to focus on high-energy events and interpersonal relationships.

The Discussion

The important role discussing one's grief plays in the bereavement process arose as another significant theme found in the current study. Balk (1997) found bereaved college students benefit from discussing their grief. LaGrand (1986) explained that social support systems allow bereaved individuals to "unburden one's self" (p. 50). The current study supports this literature, with several participants noting how discussion allowed them to process what had happened. When talking about the role discussion played in his experience with grief, Participant 4 explained, "I think it allowed me to process it and not have to bury it somewhere and to be able to deal with it . . . And I think talking through it and, um, yeah addressing it helped to do that. . . ." The participants did not always

discuss their grief with their peers, but they also found comfort in having a safe space to sit and not feel pressure to talk. Participant 3 said,

> I'm so glad I did have friends that I could have talked to if I wanted to. Not that I was always like, "Hey, let's definitely start this conversation about my grandpa," but if I wanted to, I think that I could have.

The Experienced Griever

As the final theme found in the present study, all participants displayed and reported an increased understanding of grief and bereavement. Balk (1997) explained peers display "ignorance and fear when in the presence of a grieving peer" (p. 10) because of the lack of personal experience with loss. The individuals in the current study showed their personal experiences with loss allowed them more confidence in supporting other bereaved individuals. Participant 6 explained,

> I think that now I wouldn't be as afraid to talk to someone… Whether it is hearing them out or giving them some advice. I think that I would be much more comfortable with that whereas I wouldn't have been before.

Of particular interest, almost all of the participants had opportunities to practice supporting others through bereavement—a helpful finding considering prior research. For example, Silverman (1987) explained the difficulty bereaved individuals feel in the college environment, where most people focus on schoolwork, relationships, and clothes—often causing the grieving individual to feel lonely or separated. This loneliness necessitates intentional support, especially from experienced grievers. In the current study, seven participants spoke of specific times when they used their experience with grief to help other bereaved individuals. Participant 2 recounted, "I have a friend—her

grandma just passed . . . so I was kind of able to share some of my experiences . . . So just kind of being able to hopefully I think give her like a safe space. . . ." The current study offered hope for future grieving college students, showing the willingness of experienced grievers on campus equipped to help their peers through their grief.

Limitations of Research

The first limitation to the current study came with the homogeneity of the participants and the institution at which the research took place. All participants identified as Caucasian, which may have influenced the data gathered. The research took place at a small school consisting of a primarily homogeneous population—similar faith, similar socio-economic status, and similar friends. The participants most likely knew a large number of people on campus, which may have affected the type of peer support they received during their grieving experiences.

Another limitation emerged with the inclusion criteria for participation in the study. The criteria consisted of only three requirements and resulted in varying lengths of time between when the participants lost friends or close family members and when the researcher interviewed the participants. Having a smaller window of time between the death of a close friend for family member and the interview time could prove helpful in the future. This change would allow participants to remember more specific details about the support they received from their peers.

Implications for Practice

The participants in the present study expressed the importance of having the space to grieve in the way that they needed—and that their way of coping might look different from the coping mechanisms of others. Professionals within higher education should

understand individuals grieve in different ways and should tailor their support

to the needs of each individual. Some bereaved students may need more direct support

from their resident directors or resident assistants such as discussing their bereavement

one on one. Other students may benefit from various campus resources such as a campus

pastor or counseling center. Finally, some students may need space to process their

bereavement independently. One sub-theme in the present study emerged as the

importance of authentic support. Though talking about death may feel uncomfortable,

higher education professionals should understand the authenticity of the support they

offer becomes evident to bereaved students. Individuals working with bereaved students

should make sure that they offer genuine support, such as asking questions that show the

student they care or feel sad without simply saying the right words to make themselves

feel better.

Higher education personnel should also recognize what types of support bereaved

individuals perceive as beneficial during the bereavement experience. Participants in the

current study highlighted the importance of close friends as the primary givers of

beneficial support. Higher education professionals should evaluate their current

relationship to the bereaved individual. If they have a close relationship with the

individual, the bereaved student may feel especially supported through personal

interaction with these professionals. Higher education professionals also should take into

consideration the relationship the student had with the deceased and other personal

factors that affect the grieving process. If the professional does not have that close of a

relationship to the student, he/she should capitalize on support systems bereaved college

students already have in place instead of trying to force a new relationship. Resident

directors could connect with the close friends of the bereaved student to discuss various ways to provide support. This approach would allow resident directors to stay connected to grieving student without forcing relationships on the bereaved individuals.

The current study also has implications for resident assistant training. Resident directors should equip student leaders to provide helpful support to grieving college students within their residence halls. Using results of the present study, training could include information on what authentic support looks like, such as taking time to sit with the bereaved individual or following through on an offer of support. Training for resident assistants should also include information about unhelpful peer support. Discussing different examples of hurtful phrases such as "I know what you are going through" and examples of hurtful jokes should provide the resident assistants with a framework for what unhelpful support looks like. Resident assistants should also receive training on how to create a living environment on their floor that provides a balance of alone time and community involvement for the bereaved individual. This space could come through the creation of a "quite room" where students could go for solitude or through teaching resident assistants to recognize individuals' need for space.

Future Research

The findings in the current study show a great need for understanding the phenomenon of college student bereavement. The present study looked at the experiences of eight individuals at a small, faith-based, liberal arts college in the Midwest but lacked the experiences of a broader population. Future research should look at peer support systems within residence life at larger institutions in order to understand how the size and culture of particular institutions affect students' bereavement experiences. Participants in

the present study mentioned their faith throughout the interviews. Future

research could look at the use of faith as a way to cope with grief and how faith plays a

part in the bereavement process for college students. Further research should also explore

each particular type of bereavement, especially grieving the death of a fellow student or a

loss due to suicide and how these losses might differ from other forms of bereavement.

Finally, future research could explore the role resident assistants specifically play in the

peer support process, especially considering the mixed responses in the current study

regarding their resident assistants' attempts at support or lack thereof.

Conclusion

Many students experience the loss of someone close to them throughout their time

in college and therefore need special support. The present study explored the

phenomenon of college student bereavement to understand the role peers play in the

grieving process. The results of the study showed peers, especially close friends, play a

vital role in the grieving process for bereaved college students through the support the

close friends offer and the discussion in which they participate. The study also found

bereaved individuals more readily and ably help their peers in the future through grief

and loss because of their own experiences. Supporting students through their time of grief

vitally impacts the success of students, but understanding how to provide this support

often challenges higher education professionals. The current study provided answers to

some of these questions about the phenomenon of college student bereavement. Despite

the difficulty of grieving on a college campus, the support of peers and other willing

individuals to step out of their comfort zones to offer genuine care can make the

difference between a grieving student's collegiate flourishing or floundering.

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Appendix A

Protocol Questions

1) Who passed away?
   a. When? (Year in school/time of year) Where were you?
   b. Expected or unexpected?
   c. Have you ever experience the death of someone close to you before?
2) How did living in the residence hall affect your grieving process?
   a. What is the culture and environment like on your wing/floor and how did this affect your grieving?
   b. How did being at school affect your grieving?
   c. Did you feel you had space to grieve?
   d. Did you feel pressure to move on from your grief?
3) What helpful or unhelpful support did you receive from your peers?
   a. What did people say or do that provided comfort to you?
   b. What did people say or do that made you feel more uncomfortable or upset?
   c. What role do you think discussing your grief with your peers played in your own experiences?
   d. Did you feel supported by your resident director during this time? In what ways?
   e. Did you feel supported by your Personnel Assistant? In what ways?
4) Were there any other ways you could have been supported by your peers?
   a. What would have provided the most comfort to you?
5) Were you comfortable with discussing your grief with your peers?
   a. What made it comfortable/uncomfortable?
   b. Did you feel like your peers were comfortable with talking about grief?
      i. How could you tell they were comfortable or uncomfortable?
   c. How did you feel after discussing your grief with your peers?
6) Were you comfortable with discussing your grief with your peers?
   a. What made it comfortable/uncomfortable?
   b. Did you feel like your peers were comfortable with talking about grief?
   c. How could you tell they were comfortable or uncomfortable?
   d. How did you feel after discussing your grief with your peers?
7) How has your experience with grief affected your attitude toward and future interactions with peers experiencing grief? Please give examples.
   a. How would you try and support someone who is grieving now?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

TAYLOR UNIVERSITY

INFORMED CONSENT

Bereaved College Students' Experiences with Peer Support Within Residence Life

You are invited to participate in a research study of college student bereavement and peer support. You were selected as a possible subject because of your experience with the loss of a close family member, relative, or friend during your time at Taylor University. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you many have before agreeing to be in the study. Tianna Clark, a graduate student at Taylor University in the Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development, is conducting the study.

STUDY PURPOSE
The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of college student bereavement. The study will explore grieving college students' experiences with peer support. Peer support is defined as the support given or not given through the interpersonal relationships of friends or acquaintances within the residence hall. The purpose of the study is to explore the support given by peers after the loss of someone close to the participant.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
If you agree to participate, you will be one of 8-12 subjects who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:
If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:
Take place in a 45 minute-60 minute interview. The interview will take place in a private room located on Taylor University's campus. During the interview, you will be asked 6-8 semi-structured questions as well possibly a few clarifying questions. The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview is over, an email will be sent to you asking you to confirm the accuracy of the information gathered as well as asking you to verify that the results and themes found by the researcher are truthful and complete.

RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
While participating in the study, the risks, side effects, and/or discomforts are:

Emotional risks: The topic being researched is highly sensitive and could cause you to experience emotional and mental distress. The interview questions asked will cause you to remember your experience with grief as well as any emotions associated with that time. These emotions could include but are not limited to: sadness, anger, fear, pain, loss, grief, guilt, etc.

Social risks: Social risks could include frustration with your friendships after discussing the support you received during your experience with grief. If you did not receive beneficial or helpful support during your grieving process, you may feel frustrated or upset with the people who did not provide adequate support.

Physical risks: You may experience physical risks associated with grief such as insomnia and academic difficulties. Other risks associated with grief could include effects on your physical body, such as hunger, focus, energy, confidence, identity, and other physical effects.

Other risks include possible discomfort with the questions asked during the interview. The interview questions will discuss your loss experience and therefore answering the questions may cause you to feel discomfort.

The risks of completing the interview include possible loss of confidentiality.

There may also be other unpredictable side effects.

In order to minimize the risks and side effects listed above, you may withdraw from the study at any point. You were given the interview questions upon initial contact to help prepare you emotionally for the questions that will be asked during the interview. This will also allow you to not be surprised by any of the questions asked. Throughout the interview process, you can tell the researcher that you feel uncomfortable or do not care to answer a particular question.

Taylor University's counseling center is partnering with this research project and is providing their counseling services to all participants. If at any point during the research process you feel the need to talk to a counselor, you may contact the Counseling Center through email at counselingcenter@taylor.edu or by phone between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at (765) 998-5222. You may also contact the researcher to help assist you in scheduling an appointment.

If the researcher feels that you are experiencing extreme psychological distress during the interview process, the researcher will stop the interview.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
The benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are an increased understanding of the phenomenon of college student bereavement, specifically interactions with peers during the bereavement process. The information found as a result of this study will help

equip higher education professionals with a better understanding of how to support grieving students' through the bereavement process, particularly within the residence halls. This study will equip institutions to evaluate the current support available for bereaved college students and provide valuable information on the roles that peers play in the bereavement process. Institutions will hopefully be able to use the research in this study to better equip students to support their bereaved peers, hopefully lessening the physical and emotional effects of grief on these bereaved students.

ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
Instead of being in the study, you have the option to not participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. Interviews will be recorded but only the researcher will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed once transcribing has taken place. Transcribed interviews will maintain confidentiality by changing the name of the participants to pseudonyms.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Dr. Scott Gaier, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

COSTS
There are no costs to participate in this study.

PAYMENT
You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

COMPENSATION FOR INJURY
In the event of physical injury resulting from your participation in this research, necessary medical treatment will be provided to you and billed as part of your medical expenses. Costs not covered by your health care insurer will be your responsibility. Also, it is your responsibility to determine the extent of your health care coverage. There is no program in place for other monetary compensation for such injuries. If you are participating in research which is not conducted at a medical facility, you will be responsible for seeking medical care and for the expenses associated with any care received.

CERTIFICATE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Certificate of Completion
The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies
that **Tianna Clark** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course
"Protecting Human Research Participants".
Date of completion: 04/10/2014
Certification Number: 1422368

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher, Tianna
Clark, at (260) 450-8855. After business hours, please email Tianna Clark at
tianna_clark@taylor.edu. Her address is 236 West Reade Ave, Upland, Indiana, 46989.
The study's faculty sponsor, Dr. Scott Gaier, may also be contacted at (765) 998-5391 or
emailed at scgaier@tayloru.edu.

In the event of an emergency, you may contact Tianna Clark at (260) 450-8855

If you have any questions regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or
any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be
directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at IRB@taylor.edu or the
Chair of the IRB, Susan Gavin at 756-998-5188 or ssgavin@taylor.edu.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the
study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to
which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not
affect your current or future relations with Taylor University.

SUBJECT'S CONSENT
In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research
study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree
to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____**Date:** _____