

Grief counseling groups for adolescents based on remembering practices

Granados, Stephanie

California State University San Bernardino

Dept of Educational Psychology & Counseling

5500 University Parkway

San Bernardino, CA 92407

Email: s.granados@gmail.com

Winslade, John (contact person for correspondence)

California State University San Bernardino

Dept of Educational Psychology & Counseling

5500 University Parkway

San Bernardino, CA 92407

Email: jwinslad@csusb.edu

De Witt, Megan

California State University San Bernardino

Dept of Educational Psychology & Counseling

5500 University Parkway

San Bernardino, CA 92407

Email: megan26.2@gmail.com

Hedtke, Lorraine

California State University San Bernardino

Dept of Educational Psychology & Counseling

5500 University Parkway

San Bernardino, CA 92407

Email: Lhedtke1@aol.com

And

Vitas Innovative Hospice Care San Bernardino

1845 Business Center Drive, #120

San Bernardino, CA 92408

(4594 words)

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Abstract

Focusing on “remembering” practices is new to grief counseling. Traditional approaches to grief counseling are guided by the concepts of stages or tasks, usually to move the person toward accepting the reality of loss and to “say goodbye” to their deceased loved one. This alternative approach to grief counseling, driven by social constructionism and the narrative perspective, works to keep dead loved ones close and their voices alive. Here the process of a grief counseling group for students at middle and high school levels based on these principles is outlined along with some preliminary responses from participants.

Grief Counseling Groups for Adolescents Based on

Remembering Practices

This article outlines a new approach to grief counseling groups for adolescents. It is based on several experiences of running six and eight-week groups in middle schools and high schools. These groups were not built on a traditional approach to “grief work” that historically emphasizes stages or tasks designed to “accept the reality of the loss”, “let go”, and “say goodbye”. Instead these groups were built on the assumptions of “remembering conversations”, an alternative approach to counseling those who have been bereaved. The article is based on work with three groups at middle school and high school levels in which from 6-19 students participated on each occasion.

Remembering

Drawing from the work of Hedtke & Winslade (2004, 2005), the groups incorporated the alternative perspectives of continuing bonds and “re-membering” as a conceptual focus for the group’s activities. Based in social constructionism (Gergen, 1999) and narrative therapy (White, 1989, 1995; 2007; White & Epston, 1990), remembering practices allow us to think of grief in relational tones, rather than with the more individualistic focus often found in modern psychology. Re-membering practices assume that the relationship with a deceased person does not have to end when the physical body dies. A new type of relationship, in storied form, can be actively fostered to maintain a sense of connectedness with a dead loved one and that person’s continued membership in the living person’s “club of life” (Myerhoff, 1978; 1982; 1986; White, 1989; 2007). The deceased person’s stories, love and memories are not severed from relationship

but re-incorporated and re-vitalized to enable the relationship to continue in a reconfigured form. This relationship is posited as a source of strength and comfort in the face of grief rather than being thought of as pathological or complicated bereavement. From this perspective, to sever the relationship between the living and the deceased might be said to introduce unnecessary pain and increase the suffering of grief. Remembering, by contrast, invites the development of deliberate and creative ways to keep a dead loved one close with a view to the reincorporation of this relationship as an ongoing resource for living.

We shall outline below the format of counseling groups for middle and high school students based on remembering principles and sketch some initial responses from group members. We shall speak to some of the activities that were utilized in the groups to foster the reconfigured relationship with the deceased loved one, including the use of “membership cards”. The card was created by each group member as a concrete representation of the abstract idea of this person’s ongoing connection in the student’s life. These cards were intended, not just as reminders of the deceased, but also as a resource to consult in the face of present and future life challenges and as an example of how their loved one’s voice could continue to live on in their lives.

Conventional Models of Grief Counseling

Most grief counseling literature is built upon Freud’s (1917/1957) original brief psychoanalytical comments on mourning. Freud (1917) stated that mourning “requires forthwith that the libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to the [loved] object” and that doing so constituted “deference to reality” (p. 154). Kübler-Ross’s (1969) model outlined a progression through phases or stages that map out the proper negotiation of the death of a loved one, if one is

to avoid impaired growth and development. Her theory of moving through denial, anger, bargaining, and depression towards eventual acceptance developed out of her work with people who were dying and was then extended to family members who are living with grief. Counseling models that draw upon Freud's and Kübler-Ross's work emphasize the importance of experiencing the emotions of grief, working through these emotions, and letting go of the deceased in order to move on in life as an individual. The assumption has been that successfully navigating through this progression brings the promise of an end point to the pain of grief. Worden (1982) drew on these and other psychodynamic ideas to inform his grief counseling model which has been widely used. Building also on Bowlby's (1980) theory of attachment and loss, Worden suggests four major tasks as the focus of grief resolution. These are, sequentially: accepting the reality of the loss, working through the pain, adjusting to the new environment, and relocating the deceased in order to move on (Worden 2004). While at one time Worden described grief as a gradual process of cutting cords and considered completion of the tasks essential to regain balance, resolve unfinished business, and say goodbye, he has more recently shifted to a position that allows maintaining a connection to the deceased as helpful for children and adolescents (Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992; Worden, 2004).

The stage model of the grief process has been the basis of much of the literature on grief counseling with adolescents and children (Moore & Herlihy, 1993; Kandt, 1994; Dalke, 1994; Samide & Stockton, 2002; Goldman, 2004). Worden's tasks have also been used as a framework for grief counseling with children (Charkow, 1998; Toray, 2004; Cohen, Mannarino, & Knudsen, 2004). Goldberg & Leyden (1998) also discuss using literature with elementary school children to introduce them to the language of grief, to help them deal with the reality of death, and to process their emotions.

Approaches to Grief Counseling in Groups in Schools

Until now, it has been common for grief counseling groups in schools to be based upon the dominant models of grief counseling drawn from Kübler-Ross and Worden. The emphasis has been to identify and express emotions in order for students to cathartically move through the grief process, recover from the loss, and say goodbye (Samide & Stockton, 2002; Muller & Thompson, 2003). Curricula for school-based counseling groups have been developed with the purpose of breaking the silence surrounding the topic of death and enabling students to talk about their feelings about deaths of significant others in their lives. For example, Samide and Stockton (2002) offered an eight week model for such a grief counseling group in the school setting. The sessions include grief education based on the stage model and targeting the goal of letting go of the deceased and saying good-bye. They suggest an age-appropriate explanation of the stages of grief and using questions such as, “What stage of grief are you in right now?” and, “What might it take to get to the next stage?” (p. 201). They also suggest that letting go is a long term process and requires repetition. Moore and Herlihy (1993) offer a plan for a six-session grief counseling group developed at a suburban high school in Houston. In their second session, they too teach the stages of grief. While they emphasize that grief is an individual process and that it is normal to fluctuate between stages in the process, the group is built on the model of moving through a series of stages to achieve closure. Charkow (1998) offers implications for teachers and counselors based on navigating Worden’s (1991) four tasks. Teachers can assist in helping students acknowledge the reality of the death and counselors can invite children to grieve properly in individual sessions or groups. Dalke (1994) suggests accompanying the student to the

grave site to say goodbye to their loved one. Cohen et al. (2004) conducted a pilot study with children aged 6-17 experiencing “childhood traumatic grief” (CTG), conceptualized as the presence of post-traumatic stress symptoms, and the suppression of the ability to “fully grieve” the death of the loved one. The study explored the efficacy of individual, trauma-focused, and cognitive behavioral therapy to move children towards normal grieving as defined by Worden’s tasks. Goldman (2004) suggests that it is useful for the counselor to recognize common symptoms of grief and trauma in order to reassure the bereaved that these are ‘natural’ parts of the grief process, thereby reducing anxiety and fear.

In none of the above literature is much in the way of therapeutic value given to the remembering of dead loved ones or to the deliberate fostering of continued imagined relationship with the deceased, as this might hinder the student’s acceptance of “reality”. The implication is often that the desire to maintain relationship with the dead loved one is problematic. This trend persists despite recent developments in the grief literature that are marked by new assumptions about bereavement.

The challenge from this new emphasis is for grief counseling to recognize the role of memory (Attig, 1996; 2000; 2001), of ‘continuing bonds’ (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996), and of meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 1998; 2001; 2002). Grieving considered from this new perspective looks less like a process of separating from the mourned loved one, less like a passive process of suffering pain until it somehow diminishes, and less like a requirement to say good bye or end a relationship. The role of active memory to keep a deceased loved one’s companionship present is emphasized. While such remembering may be a part of the experience of many bereaved persons and may have been frequently encouraged in practice by some

counselors, it has seldom until recently received theoretical blessing. The contrary emphasis on saying goodbye and letting go has instead been more dominant.

There are small signs of this new emphasis appearing in the literature on the counseling of children as well, but with only beginning ideas about the clinical conversations and the practical application of these concepts. While Goldman (2004) refers mostly to a medical model of treating grief, she also suggests it is normal for children to maintain a connection with the deceased and that this presence evolves over time. Silverman, Nickman, & Worden (1992) interviewed 125 children (ages 6-17) who had experienced the death of a parent. They note that children can actively construct the deceased to maintain a connection and identified five strategies the children used to connect with their loved one: making an effort to locate them, actually experiencing the deceased in some way, reaching out to initiate a connection, remembering, and keeping something that belonged to their loved one. Lawhon (2004) cites Bonnano (2001) and Bonnano and Kaltman (1999) regarding the concept of continuing bonds with the deceased and how some aspects of the relationship remain the same.

Hogan and DeSantis (1992) collected data on 157 adolescents who had experienced the death of a sibling. They asked participants the question, "If you could ask or tell your dead sibling something, what would it be?" From the responses they derived six meaning categories: regretting, trying to understand, catching up, reaffirming, influencing, and reuniting. A reoccurring theme was a sense of the ongoing presence of the deceased. Eighty-one percent of respondents reaffirmed a continuing emotional bond with the deceased and time dimensions (past, present, future) were enmeshed.

While there has been more investigation recently in the counseling literature of the continuing bonds perspective, the form of a practice based on these assumptions has been slower

to emerge. The narrative model of constructing re-membering conversations (Hedtke & Winslade, 2004) is one approach that does address this purpose but it has not yet been documented in grief counseling groups, much less in school contexts.

What does this model propose? The concept of re-membering (the hyphen is deliberate) draws upon the work of anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff (1978; 1982; 1986). Myerhoff wrote about how a community could negotiate death through the creation of “definitional ceremonies” that served the dual purposes of honoring the deceased person as a member of their community and strengthening the survivors’ sense of identity through belonging to that community. Such re-membering is much more than mere reminiscing or recalling the past. It involves the reincorporation of the dead person’s voices, stories, love, and membership in the ongoing community of the living.

Picking up on Myerhoff’s work, Michael White (1989) introduced the metaphor of “saying hullo again...” into grief counseling in order to re-direct the focus of grieving toward maintaining ongoing relationship with the dead person and seeking comfort in keeping this person’s membership current in one’s ‘membership club’ of life . This metaphor has been developed in the narrative therapy literature by White (1997; 2007); Hedtke (2000; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2003); Hedtke & Winslade (2004; 2005) and Russell and Carey (2002). The groups referred to in this article were all run on the basis of these narrative principles. They assume that group members might benefit from invitations to actively re-member their deceased loved ones and keep them in their “club of life”. The facilitators operated on the principle that relational bonds need not be severed by the biological reality of death. It is time now to explain the particular practices that were employed to embody these principles.

The Group Process

Seven students (three girls and four boys) at a Southern California middle school were the participants in the first six-session grief counseling group. The school provided a list of appropriate students who were referred by a teacher or a counselor. Deceased family members of the students included mothers, grandmothers, a father, and a cousin. The average age of participants was twelve years old and the time since the death of the loved one ranged from six months to five years. A second group of six students (four girls and two boys) at a Southern California middle school took part in an eight-session grief counseling group. These students were referred to the group by their teacher, counselor, or parents. Deceased family members included a mother, a grandmother, an uncle, and a father. The average age of the students was thirteen years old and time elapsed since the death of the loved one ranged from six months to seven years. A third group included five students (four girls and one boy) at a Southern California High School. These students were referred by their counselor or a teacher. Deceased family members included brothers, a father, and a best friend. The average age of the participants at the time of the group was sixteen years old and time elapsed since the death of the loved one ranged from one week to one year. The group process will be explained below using headings to refer to the main focus of each group meeting.

Introducing loved ones to the group. After a screening interview and obtaining informed student and parent consent, students participated in a six or eight week grief counseling group that met for one hour each week. The first session was used to introduce group members to each other, discuss confidentiality, establish group rules, and have the students introduce their

deceased loved ones. Three questions about the loved one (“Who was it that died?”; “How long ago did this happen?”; and, “What is one of your favorite things about them?”) were asked in a round robin format. Students were able to pass if they did not wish to share.

Sharing relationship stories. In the second and third group meetings, students were given miniature remembering booklets which addressed all of the questions students were going to respond to during the course of the group. Questions were aimed at inviting the telling of stories about the deceased loved one, recounting the survivor’s relationship with the deceased and talking about the meaning and significance of the deceased in group members’ lives. The high school group was also provided with a journal to write down their thoughts and feelings prior to the session and at the session’s completion. The concepts of membership and remembering were introduced in the second session and a remembering questionnaire was issued. This questionnaire was to be completed by the students through collaboration with family members or friends who knew the deceased. The aim was for the participants to continue to learn about and develop their understanding of the person who had died through accessing others’ relationships with him or her.

Acknowledging cultural rituals about death. Next, a sample of different cultural celebrations and ceremonies surrounding death were described and discussed before participants were invited to share their personal experiences of such cultural practices. The aim of the cultural exploration was to emphasize that there is no right or wrong way to grieve and that there are a rich array of approaches to grieving that draw from diverse cultural traditions. This discussion also allowed for examples to emerge of how some cultures continue incorporating the dead in

their life in an ongoing way. Funeral rituals and their effects on the group members were also discussed.

Creating membership cards. In the third session, the concept of membership was further discussed and the concrete example of creating membership cards was introduced. The abstract concept of continuing a relationship with someone not physically present was made tangible for participants in the process of constructing their membership cards. The example of a Costco card was given to help explain the idea of membership. The cards were created to represent the deceased's continuing membership in the students' club of life. Participants pasted magazine clippings, clip art, and used marker pens to note phrases the person often said onto a single sheet of paper. They included pictures of their loved ones' favorite things, and/or included messages to their loved one. They were encouraged to include responses from the remembering questions, such as, "What did your loved one appreciate about you?" and "What would your loved one say to you in difficult times?"

When complete, the single sheets of paper were shrunk down to the size of a library card on a photocopier and laminated. The cards were intended to resemble an actual membership card and to serve as a memory aid in the form of a concrete resource the students could carry with them. Carrying the cards with them outside the group would mean that participants could access their loved one's stories and love when necessary. The cards were not just nostalgic reminders of the deceased, but functioned as a symbolic support in dealing with life's challenges. Participants were encouraged to include on the cards positive words of encouragement in the voice of their deceased loved one.

As students created their cards in the group, stories were readily accessible and often were accompanied by laughter and positive mood as memories were recounted. In a later session of the first middle school group, a letter explaining the idea behind the membership cards was sent home with group members to present to a person of their choice along with the card they made. This was an attempt to encourage the enrichment of the ongoing evolving relationship with the deceased through sharing its significance with another person in the student's life. By sharing their membership card with someone they trusted, the students would be practicing an active construction of their relationship with a loved one outside of the group. This sharing led to further conversations about the deceased which, in turn, helped flesh out the deceased's ongoing significance in the students' lives.

Deconstructing messages about death and grief. Completing the membership cards and sharing stories about what was on the cards continued in the fourth session. While the students completed their membership cards, a further conversation about the messages students had received regarding the death of their loved one was facilitated. The intention of these conversations was not to reinforce any particular message as correct or as theoretically sound. Instead the aim was to open up a curious inquiry into what students found helpful or not helpful. Students own responses were regarded authoritative in this regard and responded to as more immediately relevant than, for example, what research or theoretical models might say. In this discussion, the residue of traditional discourse was heard in comments like, "People tell my parents and us that we just need to get over it."

Facilitators would then respond to such messages by asking, "Was that helpful for you to hear or not?" This question would be followed up by asking, "Why was it helpful or not

helpful?” Students were thus invited to develop their own accounts of what they might find helpful and sustaining in the context of their grief. In effect, they were encouraged to develop a deconstructive stance (Derrida, 1976; White 1992) with regard to the messages they were receiving from the cultural world around them. Some students would share feelings of anger at what had been said to them. For example, one student recounted how he had felt highly offended by the suggestion that his brother was something to “get over.”

On the other hand, students would sometimes tell of practices in their families or communities that were helpful and meaningful. Some of these practices related to the particular cultural traditions of their community. Facilitators were deliberately respectful of such practices and asked questions based on a sense of curiosity about how these practices helped or made a difference. In responding to such questions, participants were strengthening both their own sense of connection to these cultural traditions through having to explain them, and were also becoming more intentionally conscious of how these practices made a difference. Through doing so in each other’s hearing, they were also growing a small group community amongst their peers in which the re-membering of their loved one was recognized as important.

Using the voice of the dead loved one as a resource. In the fifth session, another class of re-membering questions were introduced. These were questions deliberately focused on bringing forward the voice of the dead loved one. These questions invited the students to imagine what the person who had died might have to say about something happening in the group. Here are some examples of such questions.

“What would your loved one think about the card you’re making for them?”

“What would she say about being remembered? Why would she like that, do you think?”

“What would he think of how you have been doing since his death? Would he be proud of you in any way?”

“What would she make of the messages you have been given about her death?”

“What would she want you to do in your studies now?”

“Would he be pleased with the work you have been doing for your math test, English assignment, career planning, etc? Why might he be pleased?”

These questions serve several purposes. They are questions in the subjunctive mood (Hedtke & Winslade, 2005) that are, in one sense, not “realistic”. They are not about reporting facts about what a person has said in the past. They are, in effect, about remembering a future. They can be extended further into what is happening currently in a person’s life and can continue to develop long after a person has died. For example, a question could be asked about how a deceased grandmother might appreciate that her grandson is taking up learning to play a musical instrument, because playing music was also important to her. These questions, therefore, invite a movement of the relationship with the dead loved one from the past into a participation in the ongoing fabric of life. Conversations in response to these questions therefore develop a relationship with a dead loved one beyond a sense that it existed in the past and has now been lost and towards a sense that this relationship continues to have effects in the present and the future. They can, therefore, be considered conversations that utilize re-membering in the cause of relationship construction. To be sure, such relationships are no substitute for, and are not the same as, those that existed when the person was alive. They can be substantial enough, though, to effect a shift in the grieving from a sole focus on what has been lost to a renewed and comforting focus on what can continue on. Participants are invited to a place of moving forward

in life, not through letting go and leaving the dead loved one behind, but through bringing the voice of the loved one forward, albeit in imaginary ways, as an ongoing resource for living.

Responses from Participants

Systematic data has not at this stage been collected about the effects of these groups. At present information about the effectiveness is anecdotal and informal. Initial reports, however, from the participants have been positive about the group experience. In the final session of the first group students were asked to express how much of a difference, if any, they had noticed. For example, was there a difference in their relationship with the person who had died? Responses were called for through using an action method. Students lined up on one wall of the room and were asked to imagine they were walking a number line to the other side of the room. They were instructed to take as many steps forward as they thought represented the growth in how close they felt to their loved one. Every student took at least one step forward. Two students walked all the way across the room indicating a substantial change in their relationship. They were asked what had made the difference for them. One student replied that just talking about her father sparked other memories of him. She stated that this remembering was an enjoyable experience for her. Another student remarked that, prior to participating in the group, she had felt sad when she had spoken of her grandmother and, therefore, didn't often speak of her. After her experience in the group, she reported, speaking about her grandmother made her feel better, rather than sadder. In a follow up interview approximately six months after the conclusion of the group, one student had this to say about his experience.

“It was good... it helped me remember my brother even more ... I can keep it [membership card] in my wallet or in my room posted up... it’s on my wall. I look at it every morning.”

When asked if he felt as close to his brother as he did before the group, less close, or closer, he replied, “More than when the group was over.”

This remark suggests that the student’s relationship with his deceased brother continued to grow over time and the construction of the membership card had served as an access point to facilitate the growth of relationship.

In the second group, students were asked midway through the group process to measure their relationship with their loved one by taking steps from one end of the room to the door. During the final session students were asked to place themselves in the same position as when previously asked and to either move forward or backward if they had experienced growth or deterioration in their experience of relationship with their loved one. Every student in the group moved at least one step forward.

One student remarked that it had been difficult to be in their backyard since the passing of his father but that he had remembered the good times fixing the backyard with him. With a smile on his face, he shared with the group how he had recently spent time over a weekend cleaning the backyard.

When asked what his dad might have said to him about this, he responded that his father would have told him he was proud. With this story we were able to connect the re-remembering with his present day activities at school and home. As group cohesion developed, participants became more vocal sharing stories of their loved ones. Three of the members in one group were

related and they shared how their experience had brought them together as a family. In the high school group, students suggested that meeting with a group of peers who had gone through similar experiences had been very helpful for them. On the final group evaluations one student commented that, "It was useful to talk about him." Another said, "They were all listening. They knew how it felt to lose someone important to yourself."

One participant commented, "It (the group) helped me be more open and to share my experience with others." Another girl said, "I enjoyed that I got to talk about my brother and got to actually dedicate time to him.... I can now talk about my brother without crying."

Concluding Remarks

Responses from participants in these groups has been encouraging enough to advocate that these practices continue to be developed and researched. We believe that the emphasis of the processes used in these groups differs sufficiently from previous approaches to grief counseling with children and adolescents that it deserves further attention. While there is now a healthy theoretical literature about the value of conceptualizing continuing bonds, what has been missing is a range of practices that pay particular attention to these relational connections and treat them as a resource for young people, not just as a source of suffering. This is not to argue that the suffering associated with loss is not important but it does contend that it need not be the only focus of grief counseling and may not be the most productive focus of counseling. Saying hullo again may indeed produce less ongoing pain than being asked to say goodbye.

The idea of re-membering conversations is that fostering ongoing connections and relationship might provide people with a source of both comfort and strength in the face of the

challenges of being bereaved. In a social constructionist account, identity is always formed in the interpersonal domain between people, and in conversation, rather than simply in internal processing. Hence an emphasis on relational identity development through re-remembering appears promising. We suspect that the psychological literature has paid much attention to the internal aspects of processing grief and not enough to the relational domain. It is in this domain that remembering conversations operate. We believe that it is possible for young people to learn to carry around with them the internalized voice of those whom they love as resources for living. There is no reason we can see that this should not include the voices of those who have died as well as of those who are still alive.

Until now, re-remembering conversations have been developed and become well known especially among those interested in narrative therapy. This knowledge has taken hold especially in the family therapy field. But it has not been widely known in the field of school counseling. And it has not, before now, been documented in the practice of group counseling. This was the gap that this article seeks to address. We believe that these practices are well suited to group contexts where people can engage in remembering through conversation with others who share a similar experience. They can be given the chance to explore and deconstruct what has been helpful and sustaining from the array of cultural messages they might have received and they can support each other to maintain a sense of meaning in their ongoing remembering of their deceased loved ones.

It has also seemed to us that this approach sits well with children and adolescents because they can all tell stories about someone who has mattered to them, whereas not all can always express articulately the nuances of their feelings of pain and suffering. Many will not want to focus on intense emotional expression while they are concentrating on their schoolwork. This

approach, by contrast, invites students to take their sense of connection with their deceased loved ones back into their school classrooms as a support and a source of strength. It knits students' relationship with deceased loved ones back into their daily life, rather than supporting a yawning gap between their private pain and the public persona that they must wear. What has been unique too in this exercise has been the experiment of developing membership cards. These were an attempt to make the practice of remembering less abstract and more concrete. Bridging the gap between abstract thinking and the more concrete thinking of young adolescents we believe is assisted by this approach.

What is needed now is to develop this work further in a variety of contexts. We have not yet subjected these ideas to systematic effectiveness studies. They are still early in their development. In future such studies, qualitative and quantitative, can be envisaged and we believe that the anecdotal evidence from these initial exercises warrants such further investigation.

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