

Bereavement and the Troubles in Northern Ireland

The influence of context on long-term outcome



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Abstract: This paper draws on a qualitative study of adults bereaved during childhood as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland to argue that bereavement interventions must address their individual, local community and wider social and political contexts if they are to be of any help. The article reviews the literature on traumatic bereavement, complex grief and resilience and on Northern Ireland and the effects of the Troubles. It uses excerpts from the interviews conducted in the original study to support its argument. It also highlights the need to be aware of continuing changes in the political and social context, such as the Northern Ireland peace process, and the effects these may have on individuals' ability to resolve their grief.

Keywords: Northern Ireland Troubles, bereavement, social context, political context, resilience

Studies in recent years have highlighted the long-term impact of bereavement resulting from the Troubles in Northern Ireland (see, for example, Smyth & Fay, 2000; Smyth & Hamilton, 2003; Hayes & Campbell, 2000; Shevlin & McGuigan, 2003; Dillenburg *et al.*, 2006).

Templer and Radford (2007), exploring the issue of trauma, argue that there is a danger in considering stress as a purely psychological phenomenon. They base their argument on Summerfield's contention that stress needs to

be considered in the cultural and historical contexts within which people are living.

Summerfield considers the implications faced by conflict and post-conflict societies when medical models, and psychiatric models in particular, that 'give little acknowledgement to the role of social action and empowerment in promoting mental health' are privileged over other therapeutic interventions. Monroe and Oliviere (2007) voice similar concerns about an apparent return to

The study on which this paper is based took place September to December 2004 and involved six semi-structured interviews with five adults aged 30–48 who were between five and 19 years old when one of their parents was killed as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. All were members or former members of the Wave Trauma Centre, a cross-community, voluntary organisation that was formed in Northern Ireland in 1991 to offer care and support to anyone bereaved, injured or traumatised as a result of the Troubles. Wave operates from five centres across Northern Ireland and offers outreach/befriending, psychotherapy/counselling, welfare advice, trauma training and other training opportunities, complementary therapies and youth interventions. These interventions are offered to all, irrespective of religious, cultural or political belief.

The author lost his father at an early age as a result of the Troubles. The implications of this and the general limitations of the research are explored in more detail in McNally, 2007 (pp31–33).

the privileging of a narrow medical model in palliative care where symptom control is the main aim.

This paper explores the wider social and historical contexts in which those bereaved as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland are and have been living, and their long-term impact on the individuals concerned. Drawing on the findings of a small-scale qualitative study (McNally, 2007), it argues that the social and political contexts of these bereavements have been overlooked in previous research and need to be taken into account in any interventions designed to help these individuals.

Context and bereavement

Dillenburg and colleagues (2006) argue that the Troubles have had wide-ranging, long-term negative effects: psychological, financial, educational, and social (eg. social segregation, loneliness, break-up or radical transformation of family relationships, splitting up of communities).

McNally (2007) finds that the responses of the local and wider community, the media, the justice system and the changing political context can all influence the longer-term bereavement outcome.

Templer and Radford (2007) argue that a person's perception of him or herself as either a victim or survivor of the Troubles in Northern Ireland is linked to their self-esteem, physical well-being, sense of hope for the future, and their personal emotional and financial security. Dillenburg and Keenan (2005) developed the DISC analysis of bereavement to explore how the contexts of the *death* itself, the *individuals* affected, the *social* factors, and the wider *cultural norms and systems* (thus the acronym DISC) combine to influence the bereavement experience.

With reference to societies emerging out of conflict, Gilligan (2006, pp339–340) argues that healing is not a discrete process that occurs only within a therapeutic setting. Rather, it is intrinsically bound up with issues of social justice, which can only be dealt with in the political domain. Hamber (2004) argues that a psychosocial approach recognises that trauma work with victims of political violence requires the social and political context to be addressed at the same time as their individual psychological needs.

Writing on the issue of palliative care and resilience, Monroe and Oliviere argue that professional care alone cannot meet the needs of all the dying and bereaved. Alongside, services must seek to build resilience and capacity by working with and supporting the capacity of communities to respond sensitively and supportively (Monroe & Oliviere, 2007, p4).

Templer and Radford (2007), in their ground-breaking research with voluntary sector organisations working to rebuild communities after The Troubles, found that victim

and survivor groups tend to provide for the needs for their members in three broad areas:

- psychosocial therapeutic interventions (including healthcare, counselling and therapies)
- social networks of support (including befriending, remembrance)
- advocacy (for welfare benefits, financial help, education, training and employment, and acknowledgement, information/truth recovery).

This multi-faceted approach is reflected in the recommendations of the Commission for Victims and Survivors in Northern Ireland (2009) on the needs of victims and survivors. These list a broad range of needs, including individual psychotherapeutic treatments, social support networks and healthcare, practical financial help, and education, training and employment. Alongside are needed advocacy, information, truth recovery and justice, public acknowledgement and recognition, and actions to address key social issues such as isolation, segregation and exclusion. These recommendations indicate the wide-ranging needs of those bereaved as a result of the Troubles, reflecting the equally wide-ranging circumstances and contexts in which they are living. Addressing individual psychological needs alone, or as the main focus of intervention, is unlikely to meet these complexities of need.

Monroe and Oliviere (2007), writing on resilience in palliative care, argue for a need to find the right balance between expert professional interventions and general loss education that fosters protective personal and social learning. This encompasses self-help groups, public education, stories and narratives, family systems approaches, creative approaches and user involvement, among others. They cite Newman's definition to describe resilience in this context: not as an individual characteristic but 'a universal capacity which allows a person, group, or community to prevent, minimise or overcome damaging effects of adversity' (Monroe & Oliviere, 2007, p1). This recognises the importance of the community and context to addressing individual trauma and needs.

Fast (2003), writing about the aftermath of the Columbine killings in the US, argues that sudden death survivors are more vulnerable to experiencing feelings of helplessness, heightened guilt about having failed to prevent the disaster, and a strong need to blame someone for the crisis. However, Fast argues that individual grief work with survivors could not be completed until medical and legal issues had been resolved, including lawsuits, an ongoing FBI investigation and Senate hearings.

Fast also highlights the breadth of response at national, community and family level following the killings. These encompass national policy actions, such as juvenile crime reviews, community memorials and internet forums, and

mutual support groups for bereaved families. All these, Fast emphasises, are necessary components of people's attempts to 'reconceptualiz[e] the world in a meaningful way' (2003, p490).

Pat-Horenczyk and colleagues (2009) challenge the search for individual, isolated risk factors for childhood post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They cite research showing mass violence and human-made disasters (terrorism, shootings, etc) are more likely to trigger PTSD in children than natural disasters. They contend that individuals' responses to trauma are based on complex combinations of risk and protective factors that can be divided into two separate groups: environmental and contextual factors (the nature of the traumatic event, culture and ethnicity, social support, parental attachment, parental psychopathology), and individual determinants (age, gender, cognitive ability, biological determinants and self-efficacy).

Layne and colleagues (2009) similarly argue that an individual's vulnerabilities and coping resources are intrinsically linked and that the practice of examining such risk and protective factors in isolation from each other decontextualises the person. Unless practitioners are better able to describe, explain and predict how adverse and beneficial factors intersect and influence post-traumatic adjustment, while they may be better at identifying those in need, they will still lack the knowledge to enable them to help them.

The interviews

Interviews conducted for a small-scale qualitative study of people bereaved in the Troubles support these contentions. The study (McNally, 2007) involved six semi-structured interviews with five adults aged 30–48 who were between five and 19 years old when one of their parents was killed as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

The following extracts provide a snapshot of how the people interviewed for the study responded to their bereavement, both at the time and consequently, and the array of contextual factors that impacted on their experience.

Sean

Sean is a Catholic whose father was murdered by Protestant paramilitaries when he was a teenager. At the time of the research interviews Sean was in his late 40s. Only one of those responsible for the murder of Sean's father was charged and the case is still officially open.

Sean described how his life was completely changed by his father's murder:

'I went from being a carefree young fella chasing girls, going to discos ... was well on the way to where I wanted to

be, that one night changed my entire life and continues to change my entire life.'

Following his father's death, Sean had to take over running the factory his father owned. However the factory was burned down a number of years later. Sean said he wasn't easy to live with after this:

'Then my marriage broke up which was another point and I myself trace that back to my father's murder and the burning of the factory ... I would say that because of the personality changes in me, it cost me my life twice and then cost me my marriage.'

Sean then talked about his relationship with his present wife:

'She really was the person who made the difference to me and she had been working in the caring field for many years and knew the value of counselling ... I knew instantly the moment I started to talk to my wife that it was something that really made a massive change in me ... if it hadn't been for her then I think that I could have ended up with mental health issues.'

Sean spoke about his struggles to come to terms with his father's death, because the case remains unresolved and new information keeps coming to light:

'There's a lot of circumstances and a lot of hard facts surrounding my father's murder ... that need to be cleared up. I have an ongoing investigation being carried out by the Police Ombudsman's office and that has been quite traumatic ... I had to take them and show them the spot where he had been killed, I also got more information off them about the murder that I hadn't been aware of. When I went home, I went to pieces ... more than I did when the actual event took place over 30 years ago ... within the last two months I have become aware of all the identities of the people involved in my father's murder, so even now there's fall-out from it ... So even now after 30 years, there's still new things coming to light that are renewing the trauma.'

Martin

Martin is a Protestant. His father was a policeman who was killed when Martin was a young child. At the time of interview Martin worked with a charity that helped former police officers. Martin was in his early 30s at the time of interview. His father's murder is still unresolved.

Martin described how he was affected at the time:

'My confidence went after my father was murdered. I went from being a chirpy child playing at school concerts and reciting poems at parochial halls to someone who wouldn't



Belfast, July 2002 – graffiti at the height of the Troubles speaks for itself. Photo © istockphoto.com/villmarkliv

open their mouth ... I had no confidence because of what had happened.'

Martin said that he was in the room when police officers were discussing his father's murder and that they openly named the suspects, who lived in the same small rural area as Martin's family. He said this still had implications for his bereavement experience:

'As far as I am aware, I'm the only one in the family that knows all of the names of the people involved in the murder and my mother actually meets some of them every week in her social life and I'm the only one who knows out of the family ... I never told anyone, my mother would go into meltdown if she knew who it was ... When I go for a walk on a Sunday, I actually usually meet one of the killers, walking his dogs, in the same area as that where my father was murdered ... now I'm actually trying to get more information about what happened without any of the rest of the family knowing.'

Sarah

Sarah is a Catholic whose father was murdered when she was a young child. Sarah's family broke up after the death

of her mother, which also occurred in her childhood, and Sarah had little contact with her siblings for many years. At the time of interview Sarah was in her late 30s. She described the insensitive treatment she received when attending the inquiry into her father's murder, which took place only a few years before the interview, and she was excluded and her grief unacknowledged publicly and within the family:

'No one knew who I was. They [the media] were speaking to the rest of the family. A woman reporter asked to get past me in order to speak to the family. No one knew who I was ... I think I'm the black sheep of the family. I was a Catholic and married a Protestant and my children were brought up as Protestants and I think sometimes my family are bitter because of that and don't want any contact with me ... To me, I'm just a stranger to my family, even when we were at the inquiry I felt like I was just a person sitting looking through the window at this family. You're there but you're not there. They have more of a past together than I do, I have nothing.'

Sarah went on to speak about how she felt about the people who killed her father:

'The people who did that to my father, I can't forgive them. They took a precious person away from me and they might as well have ripped my heart out ... I just can't forgive them.'

The peace process

All of the interviewees were asked about their reactions to the peace process and the effect on them personally.

Sean described how the peace process 'robbed' him of his ability to cope:

'I would often say that the peace process robbed me of my coping mechanism because I had been raised in what I will describe as a war of which myself and my family members were victims ... When the prisoners got out [following the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998], when I could see people [prisoners] being reunited with their families, I really knew then that my dad wasn't coming back ... That was probably equal in intensity to the night he was murdered ... I felt cheated on another level, on the level of unrealistic expectation that un-captured culprits, perpetrators, would be caught and go to jail for a long time and there's a realisation that actually they won't ever and that's something that I'm battling to come to terms with even now.'

Martin felt that it had robbed him of justice, as his father's killers were unlikely to be brought to trial:

'I know they were beginning to get close a number of years on [to catching the people who killed his father]. This was about five years ago but I was told, because of the Belfast Agreement, they couldn't politically pursue them and it was a political sop not to go after them ... Now I'm actually trying to get more information about what happened and trying to find out what went on and if the case is still open, without any of the rest of the family knowing.'

He felt there was no real peace process where he lived in. He talked about high expectations in the immediate aftermath of the ceasefires [the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires of 1994] that were never realised:

'Everyone was over the moon, we thought that maybe something would come of it but within weeks there was nothing of it ... we saw that all of the paramilitaries started to become more in your face because beforehand there was a strong security force presence in our areas. Within two months of the ceasefire happening, we knew it meant nothing ... the police seemed to have been told that they weren't allowed to touch these people ... I think this year [2004] there have been 123 security personnel moved because of a threat to their lives. So the news is saying peace and the reality is that there's anything but'

In contrast, Sarah spoke about how she had to make a conscious decision to change her lifestyle to acknowledge what she felt was a new and safer reality after the ceasefires:

'Before the ceasefires, my friends used to come to my house and it used to take me five minutes to get the door open [because of the number of locks on the door], cos I was always afraid when I was growing up that what happened to my father was going to happen to me. When the ceasefires happened, I started to take them [the locks] away cos I didn't want my kids living in fear. I realised that I would have to stop it and try and relax and live my life.'

Discussion

This paper seeks to demonstrate the continued impact on individuals of a traumatic childhood bereavement as a result of the Troubles, and the complexity of that bereavement experience and resulting grief. The extracts from the interviews with these three people reflect the influence of their personal and family contexts, but also that of the wider political environment within which they lived and continue to live.

Importantly in the context of Northern Ireland, they also demonstrate the impact on these individuals many years later of the Belfast Agreement. Both Sean and Martin clearly feel their right to justice has been denied them, and that this is further complicating and hindering their grieving for their dead fathers. Hamber (2004) argues that truth, acknowledgement and justice cannot be separated out from the healing process; psychosocial interventions cannot operate in a vacuum (cited in Dillenburg *et al*, 2006, p21). Armour (2003) argues that the meaning given to death by homicide is dictated by society through media reports, the justice system and community response. The bereaved individuals have no say in this process.

Martin and Sarah's stories illustrate a further complexity – that of divided families and people isolated and excluded from collective grieving. Martin describes being isolated from his family by his knowledge of the identity of the killers, which he cannot share with the others. Sarah talks about being excluded from the family's grief because she is seen as having betrayed them, by marrying outside their religion. Her experience would be described by Doka (1989) as disenfranchised grief.

The report by Templer and Radford (2007) aimed to capture the experiences of groups and individuals receiving funding to work with victims and survivor support groups. They found that, in many cases, respondents said it was the first time that researchers had asked to hear their stories and the first time their unique, individual circumstances had been given any official acknowledgement. The report went on to recommend that 'in the future, special time and energy be devoted to developing [research] methodologies

that are appropriate to individuals' circumstances and needs' (Templer & Radford, 2007, p15).

The importance of a qualitative methodology is emphasised by Muldoon, Trew and Kilpatrick (2000), who contend that there is a poor understanding of the long-term effects of political violence. Armour (2003, p524) similarly contends that such an approach is appropriate for research that seeks to systemically examine unexplored areas such as the lived experience of homicide survivors.

The findings from the research drawn on for this paper support these recommendations. Any future research into the needs of those bereaved by the Troubles should take a qualitative, person-centred approach as a starting point and highlight any cross-contextual and individual issues that subsequently emerge.

Future qualitative research and evaluation of interventions to support people who are bereaved in this way should focus on:

- what has happened to the bereaved person in the past
- what they are currently dealing with
- what they may have to deal with in the future (such as receiving new information about a murder investigation)
- how interventions have/have not adequately responded to the specific contexts in which the individual has been living.

Conclusion

This article has presented evidence to support its argument that bereavement cannot be understood without attention to the contextual circumstances in which it occurs. Any interventions offered to the victims and survivors of the Troubles in Northern Ireland have to acknowledge the complex contexts in which these individuals live, and the uniqueness of every person's experience. Moreover, it must be recognised that these needs will change as these contexts change, as has happened through the subsequent peace process that, for some, may further complicate and prolong their grieving.

There is a clear need for more qualitative research into the experience of bereavement in traumatic social and political contexts, both to inform our understanding of how this impacts on the grieving process and to inform interventions to support the bereaved. ■

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