Grief Communication and Disenfranchised Loss

Subjects: Communication

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Disenfranchised loss, or loss not recognized as a legitimate reason for grieving, affects personal and organizational well-being. Following a disenfranchised loss, bereaved individuals use communication to grapple with their loss and emotions across numerous personal and professional contexts. This entry details research on communicative underpinnings of emotions and grief before reviewing disenfranchised loss across organizational contexts.

disenfranchised grief   communication   emotions   organizations   virtual support groups

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1. How Communication Organizes Emotions and Grief

The death of a loved one can result in deep emotional pain that is not captured in organizational policies or societal mourning expectations. Although grief can feel isolating, almost all individuals experience loss and grief at some point. Grief is a social and interpersonal emotion often involving intense feelings and emotion displays [1]. More specifically, grief is an emotional response to a loss [2] that varies significantly from person to person, but the average grief recovery period is 1–2 years [3]. Americans perpetuate cultural scripts about coping with loss and grief, such as expecting bereaved individuals to resume work while still experiencing grief [4], which can suppress grief processes and disrupt sustainable practices.

Emotions and grief are shaped by—and shape—macro- [5][6][7][8], meso- [9][10][11], and micro-discourses [12][13]. Discourses encompass everyday communication interactions and patterns that contribute to how individuals understand events, expectations, and meanings [14]. Whereas macro-discourses refer to "enduring systems of thought" [14] (p. 46), meso-discourses describe communication at the institutional or organizational level, and micro-discourses describe day-to-day communication that reifies and shapes discourses at other levels. Macro-discourses (e.g., societal expectations to maximize corporate gains [5]) shape meso- (e.g., organizational policies, rules, norms) and micro-discourses (e.g., everyday talk privileging rationality [15], leader support [16]). In turn, micro- and meso-discourses shape assumptions about "which emotions [to] have, when [to] have them, and how [to] experience and express these emotions" in a given context [17] (p. 275). Thus, discourses shape one another [14][15][18] and are integral to processing and displaying emotions [19].

Organizational and societal discourses privilege neutral or positive emotional expressions, creating emotion display rules for Western individuals and emphasizing the interdependence among macro-, meso-, and micro-discourses

[19][20]. Regarding bereavement emotions, meso- (e.g., bereavement policies) and macro-discourses (e.g., dominant assumptions about grief) organize bereaved individuals' micro-communication (e.g., expressed emotions, talking about loss and associated grief) and understanding that they should "stifle their grief" and focus on work [21] [22]. At the societal level, US individuals expect that losing a loved person will be followed by various emotion rules and scripts, such as displaying grief by "falling apart" [23] (p. 48), reconstructing oneself [24], and taking time away from organizational roles and other responsibilities [25]. However, bereaved individuals often feel that they need to return to work [4] and, in some cases, suffer in silence [21] because their grief extends well past workplace leave policies and professional norms for grieving. On average, Western workplace bereavement policies for "loved ones" allow for 2–3 days off following the death of an immediate family member [4][25][26]. Navigating emotions following a loss requires grieving individuals to negotiate and process complex emotional rules.

Considering the macro-, meso-, and micro-discourses that shape understandings of grief and emotional displays, Weick's sensemaking theory [27] provides a communication lens to understand disenfranchised grief and how individuals process novel experiences. Sensemaking theory calls scholars to attend to the spaces in between experiencing a critical moment or change (i.e., a loss), communicating about the experience to process (dis)similarities between the critical moment and past experiences, and understanding paths forward [27]. After experiencing an equivocal moment, such as a loss, bereaved individuals recollect their past experiences with societal discourses that privilege rationality over emotionality [21]. Then, the bereaved use communication to process their past experiences with grief, interpersonal interactions, and organizational policies to understand (1) the feelings they have, (2) the emotions they should display, and (3) when and where they can display emotions [5] [28]. Thus, cultural, organizational, and daily communication norms shape all emotions and grief processes. Emotion displays and grief sensemaking are further complicated following losses that are not sanctioned or deemed as appropriate reasons for grieving.

2. Disenfranchised Grief Across Contexts

Although all bereaved emotional displays are negotiated alongside discourses that sanction private and professional emotions, feeling a need to return to normal is further complicated when bereaved individuals are constrained regarding "who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom [they] should grieve" [29] (p. 9). Disenfranchised grief follows losses that cannot be socially sanctioned or publicly mourned [30][31][32]. Numerous factors may foreground disenfranchised grief [31]. Guided by past experiences with societal discourses, the disenfranchised grievers may perceive that society does not recognize their relationship with the deceased (e.g., relationships with an ex or mentor), their loss (e.g., pet loss), their grief (e.g., grieving longer than expected), their companion's identity (e.g., incarcerated individuals), or their companion's death event (e.g., losing someone to suicide or HIV/AIDS) [31]. For instance, perinatal and fetal mortality can cause parents stress and isolation because they feel their grief is not legitimate compared to individuals mourning traditionally accepted deaths [33][34][35]. Pet loss provides another example of disenfranchised grief. Almost 70% of Americans care for companion animals [36] and are likely to experience some form of grief at the death of their companion animal, yet feel disenfranchised by their personal and professional contacts who do not treat this as a serious loss [28][37][38].

Importantly, emotion and grief sensemaking must be negotiated against organizational and societal discourses and familiar enactments [27]. For example, on the one hand, Coker and Riforgiate found that members of a virtual support group for disenfranchised pet loss engaged in sensemaking and resisted broad discourses that privilege rationality [5], managerialism [15], and normative grief [38] to explore and express authentic emotions. On the other hand, these individuals regulated emotions in the support group to align with and perpetuate ingrained emotional discourses. It is well documented that Western society does not sanction disenfranchised loss [30][31], which has been studied across clinical [32][39], organizational [21][22][31], and support group contexts [28][38][39][40][41].

From interpersonal and organizational standpoints, disenfranchised bereaved individuals struggle to garner geographically-close support from friends, family, and colleagues [21][28][37][38]. American workplaces grant little to no leave time or support for poorly understood losses, such as the death of a pet, ex-partner, mentor, or fetus [4][42]. Grieving workers can feel unsupported by work [4][21], struggle with managing their emotions at work [43], and experience stressors upon returning to work [44]. Workers who experience a disenfranchised loss and grief not sanctioned by workplace policies [25] and leaders [21][44] can experience especially adverse effects, emphasizing the need for additional research into how disenfranchised grief layers onto organizational experiences and limits sustainable practices.

Furthermore, given that Western society and workplaces do not sanction disenfranchised grief [25][31][34] and that emotions are often negotiated within managerial and rational boundaries across personal and professional interactions [6][15], disenfranchised bereaved individuals often must find alternative contexts for grief support. To this end, a related body of research explores how those experiencing disenfranchised grief engage with others to process their emotions within virtual communities dedicated to emotional expression and healing, such as virtual grief support groups [38][41]. Virtual support spaces have been celebrated for their ability to engender validation, integration, and healing among disenfranchised bereaved individuals [40][41]. Individuals grieving the loss of their companion animal report valuing virtual support groups because individuals often feel unable to express their emotions to their friends, family, and coworkers [38]. Therefore, virtual support groups are potential sites for resisting colonizing emotion discourses (e.g., professionalism and managerialism) that grievers encounter offline. Denker and Dougherty [6] called for such "safe spaces" free of managed emotion performances to break the cycle of privileging rationality.

However, cultural scripts for emotion rules reach far beyond corporate organizational boundaries [5]. For example, personal homes and community life adhere to managerial discourses that privilege rationality (i.e., corporate colonization [5]), meaning it takes considerable effort to normalize disenfranchised emotion displays and create safe spaces to engage with authentic emotions [6]. Even in virtual "safe spaces," individuals often regulate the emotional intensity of their communication or explain that they are leaving the virtual space because their emotions are too strong [28]. Thus, research finds that even anonymous spaces dedicated to authentic emotional expression and healing are unsafe from disenfranchising discourses because individuals process their grief and organize emotions based on their past experiences with competing emotion discourses. Considering that sensemaking theory posits that individuals draw on their past experiences to understand and process new information [27], support group members might find it challenging to resist macro-, meso, and micro-discourses. It remains pertinent

to explore how cultural contexts shape disenfranchised emotional communication to better understand the implications of emotion rules across societal, organizational, and interactional levels, and generate sustainable practices for organizing emotions following a disenfranchised loss.

3. Supporting Individuals Experiencing Disenfranchised Grief in Organizations

Following calls for additional procedural support for bereaved and suffering workers [21][25], scholars provide practical recommendations for supporting disenfranchised bereaved organizational members in professional and virtual support spaces [28]. To support organizational members in workplaces and protect the bottom line, organizations should consider the benefits of formally sanctioning disenfranchised losses. Providing leave and encouraging organizational members to utilize leave for disenfranchised loss experiences communicates a supportive organizational culture that promotes sustainable practices over time. Having time away to cope with loss and feel supported by an organization can increase workers' sense of wellbeing, decrease the likelihood of burnout, and increase productivity [4][45]. By offering and encouraging the use of formalized and inclusive bereavement policies, organizations can begin pushing back on macro-level discourses that invalidate disenfranchised emotions.

Further, because many disenfranchised bereaved individuals turn to online spaces for support [38][40][41], virtual safe spaces should account for and interrogate colonizing discourses woven into the fabric of US society [5][6]. Aakhus and Rumsey noted that virtual support groups should explicitly communicate with members about their roles, who their community is, and what their goals are [46]. Thus, Coker and Riforgiate recommended that virtual support groups embed emotion information in the site material (e.g., ground rules) and share with members that the space is dedicated to authentic emotions and expression (e.g., We are often taught from a young age to suppress our emotions in interpersonal interactions, at work and school, and sometimes even at home. We want this space to celebrate your authentic emotional experiences that you might suppress in other spaces).

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