

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GRIEF
ASSOCIATED WITH SUDDEN DEATH**

**A Thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University.**

Kevin E. Mist

1998

ABSTRACT

This research explores how grief is socially constructed, by analysis of the everyday language people use when talking about grief associated with the sudden or unexpected death of a family member. The study deconstructs grief talk in transcripts of interviews with ten participants recently bereaved. The texts were read and discourses producing grief and subjectivity are illustrated. With grief being constituted through language, this was analysed by use of Potter and Wetherell (1992) model of discourse analysis.

The study tends to support the notion that there are idiosyncratic aspects to grief which are constructed and constituted in multiple discourses. Grief, is constructed as inner complex emotions that are influenced by social and cultural factors which bring understanding and meaning to the loss. Grief is something that people 'do' rather than something that is 'done' to them, and therefore, is personal management as people deal and cope with a mixture of other emotions and thoughts which are embodied within the individual. These emotions and thoughts to some extent are able to be controlled. Grief, although an inner complex emotional response to death, is dealt with and managed in social relatedness. However, there are aspects of grief that could not be constructed linguistically, suggesting that grief is not entirely socially or culturally constituted. Thus, there may be aspects to grief which are never resolved, as there are no words to give meaning to that experience. Grief, has many determinants which affect the outcome of bereavement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the co-operation and courage of the ten people who took part in this study. Their accounts of their experience provided a rich source of material for exploring the issues of how grief is socially constructed.

Special acknowledgement and sincere thanks are due to my supervisor Dr Keith Tuffin, who has encouraged, inspired and guided me through this thesis. His support and valuable criticism at appropriate stages of the study kept me going.

I would also like to acknowledge my children, Michael, Alex and Laura who have been very tolerant and understanding.

I also acknowledge and appreciate the time and effort Heather Goffin and Debbie Gray contributed in proof reading this finished work.

CONTENTS

		Page
	Abstract.....	ii
	Acknowledgements.....	iii
	Contents.....	iv
	 INTRODUCTION.....	 1
1	THE RESEARCH APPROACH - DISCOURSE ANALYSIS.....	9
2	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	15
	Theoretical background.....	15
	Contemporary literature.....	17
	Constructionist approach.....	20
3	METHOD.....	24
	Interview settings.....	24
	Participants in the study.....	25
	Interview procedure.....	28
	Interview questions.....	29
	Interview transcription.....	30
	Coding.....	31
	Ethical concerns.....	32
4	ANALYSIS - EMOTIONS AND THOUGHTS.....	34
	Mixture of other emotions and thoughts.....	35
	Embodiment of grief.....	40
	Control of emotions and thoughts.....	42
5	ANALYSIS - SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES.....	48
	Grief is shared / family influences.....	48
	Community.....	53
	Maintenance of emotional bonds.....	56
	Culture.....	57

	Page
6 ANALYSIS - COPING WITH GRIEF.....	62
Individual coping.....	62
Social support.....	64
Trait discourse.....	66
Counselling.....	68
7 DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION.....	75
REFERENCES.....	81
APPENDICES	
A Letter.....	87
B Information Sheet.....	88
C Consent Form	90
D Interview Schedule	91
E Transcription Notations.....	92
F Summary of Results Letter to Participants.....	93