

Qualitative Research

Sudden and unexpected death in Sámi areas in Norway - A qualitative study of the significance of religiosity in the bereavement process

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Abstract: Sudden and unexpected death represents a severe life event incorporating multiple stressors and is potentially more traumatizing than natural deaths. Religiosity is an important resource in everyday life and may be especially important during times of loss. The aim of this paper is to explore the significance of religiosity in the coping process after sudden death, using a qualitative semi-structural in-depth interview guide to investigate the experiences of 30 bereaved people from different Sámi areas in Northern Norway. The findings showed that religiosity might be a great source of help in the grieving and coping process.

Keywords: Sudden death, bereaved, religiosity, coping, indigenous Sámi

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Sudden and unexpected death (accident, sudden infant death, suicide, homicide) represents a severe life event incorporating multiple stressors, and is potentially more traumatizing than natural deaths (Li, Precht, Mortensen, & Olsen, 2003; Rostila, Saarela, & Kawachi, 2012; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). The high prevalence of sudden and unexpected deaths, especially suicides and accidents, is well documented both among indigenous and majority populations in the Arctic (Ahlm, Hassler, Sjölander, & Eriksson, 2010; Silvikien, Haldorsen, & Kvernmo, 2006; Holck, Day, & Provost, 2013; Bakke Kvåle & Wisborg, 2011). However, there has been a limited focus on bereavement in the Arctic. Furthermore, bereavement and coping of the bereaved in Sámi areas in Northern Norway has never before been explored in a systematic way.

Bereavement and coping

The terms "bereavement" and "grief" are utilized in this paper according to the definitions provided by Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut (2001). Bereavement refers to the new state of being and the objective situation of having lost someone close. Grief is defined as the emotional, psychological and somatic reactions to the loss of a loved one through death. It is recognized that there is no single process through which all bereaved people must necessarily go, in order to resolve and cope with their grief, and the sources of individual variation are particularly important (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010). Coping is defined as an ongoing cognitive and behavioral effort to manage specific external and/or internal demands (Lazarus, 1993). According to the dual process model of coping with bereavement, there are two parallel tracks where bereaved people alternate between loss-orientated and restoration-orientated coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The grieving process also involves a process of reconstructing and creating new meaning in life without the deceased (Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008).

There is an agreement that a healthy outcome of a grief process is when the bereaved have adapted and adjusted to the new situation without the loved one and the loss is integrated in the ongoing life. A non-adaptive outcome is when

bereaved people experience a persistent sense of disbelief regarding the death and resistance to acceptance of the painful reality (Shear & Shair, 2005). Bereaved people after sudden and unexpected deaths have a higher risk of complicated grief where they struggle in a long-lasting loss-orientation process without the necessary alternation between restoration- and loss-orientation processes (Stroebe et al., 2007). Such processes may be influenced by different factors such as cultural context and religiosity. This will be elaborated on in the following.

The Sámi people

The Sámi people are one of the indigenous groups residing in the circumpolar area, and have traditionally lived in the northern parts of Finland, Sweden, Norway and the Russian Kola Peninsula. The estimated population size is about 100 000 and the majority of the Sámi people live in Norway (60 000) where they are formally recognized as an indigenous people. The Sámi have their own language, history, and culture with their own traditions and norms.

In Norway, the Sámi people live in different multiethnic areas with Sámi, majority Norwegians, and in some areas also a small minority of Kvens (descendants of Finnish speaking immigrants who immigrated to Northern Norway in the 18th and 19th centuries) and also sometimes other foreign minority groups. Like other indigenous peoples, the Sámi people have been colonized and subjected to dominating missionary practices and assimilation policies by the Norwegian government resulting in a strict and long standing assimilation process (Norwegization) with a fatal effect on the Sámi language, worldview and identity. The strict and intense assimilation process prohibited the use of the Sámi language in schools and public places, and many Sámi children were placed in boarding schools (Minde, 2005). However, during the last four decades there has been a subsequent revitalization process among the Sámi people in Norway.

Christianity and folk religiosity

In former times, the pre-Christian Sámi religion consisted of a worldview divided into three connected realms, the "heaven", "earth" and "underworld", which included the realm of the dead. The idea of the presence of the deceased had a central place in pre-Christian Sámi religion. Death did not mean the end of a person's existence, but a transition to a different relationship between the living and the dead (Myrvoll, 2010). This is in accordance with an indigenous belief system with a holistic notion of an interconnectedness of the

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elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate where people, plants, animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated (Grieves, 2008).

In the 17th century missionaries forced Christianity into the Sámi communities, but different aspects of Sámi religion continued to exist integrated in the Christian worldview (Myrvoll, 2010). In addition, today many Sámi are strongly influenced by Laestadianism, a pietistic and conservative revived movement within the Lutheran tradition, which originated in the mid-19th century. A part of the traditional medicine is integrated in the Laestadian Christian movement where the healing ritual consists of prayers. Regardless of ethnicity and religious affiliation, many inhabitants in Sámi areas still adhere to their traditional medicine and worldview (Sexton, 2009). The parallel between Christianity and traditional worldview and practices can be termed folk religiosity, a phenomenon that also could include spirituality.

Folk religiosity and bereavement

Folk religiosity is characterized as being present in the moment of everyday life and is closely bound up with culture and way of living (Myrvoll, 2010). It is an important force in everyday life and may be especially important during times of loss as a resource and coping strategy during the bereavement process. Although inconsistent, a significant body of research indicates that the relation between religion, spirituality and adjustment to bereavement is generally positive (Becker et al., 2007; Wortman & Park, 2008a). In a study by Parker (2005) spiritual and religious belief systems were associated with an adaptive outcome of grief. Parker found that "extraordinary experiences", experiences that occur at the time of or after the death of someone close, and are assumed to signify contact or communication with the deceased facilitate the grieving process of the bereaved. According to Parker (2005) further research on the significance of extraordinary experiences and the grief process may lead to powerful new therapeutic approaches to bereavement. To accomplish this, Parker (2005) particularly calls for qualitative and phenomenological methodology.

Bereavement will be expressed differently depending on the cultural context in which it takes place. The aim of this paper is to explore if and how both religiosity and folk religiosity are important in the coping process after sudden and unexpected death among bereaved people in Sámi areas in Norway.

Method

The data analyzed in this paper is part of the

North Norwegian Bereavement Study consisting of data from two samples, "the community sample" and "the bereaved sample". Both quantitative (self-administered questionnaire) and qualitative methodology (in-depth interviews) were applied, and this paper concerns the findings from the in-depth interviews of the bereaved in the latter sample. The North Norwegian Bereavement Study is a replication of a previous research project that was conducted on the majority population of Norway from 1996 to 2000 (Dyregrov, 2003), although the present study has an extended cultural and resilience focus. The Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics in Northern Norway approved the study.

Procedure

The informants in the bereaved sample were recruited by the leading general practitioners or leaders of the crisis teams in all municipalities in Northern Norway (n=88) and 8 selected municipalities in the Southern Sámi area.

The recruiters were initially contacted by phone and invited to recruit bereaved people from their municipalities. Two peer organizations, LEVE-Troms (a local unit of the nationwide association for the bereaved after suicide) and LUB (the Norwegian SIDS and Stillbirth Society), were also invited to recruit members that fitted the inclusion criteria. The general inclusion criteria for participants were: 1) 18 years or older, 2) having lost a close person by sudden and unexpected death (accident, sudden infant death, suicide, homicide), 3) having lost the person from 6 months up to 7 years ago, and for the interview sample: 4) being resident in the selected Sámi areas. The different Sámi areas were preselected to cover the variation of the Sámi population in Norway (i.e. Southern Sámi, Lule Sámi and Northern Sámi areas).

The recruitment letter informed about the study and asked those who decided to participate to respond by returning the consent form. In the consent form, the bereaved also responded yes or no to whether they agreed to be contacted later for an interview. Altogether, 424 letters/requests were distributed to the communities (336), LEVE-Troms (37) and LUB (51). In addition, six bereaved people recruited themselves after publicity about the study in the media. In total 151 consent forms were returned, with altogether 244 consents from bereaved to participate in questionnaires and/or in-depth interviews. From the 204 bereaved who consented to be interviewed, 34 bereaved from selected Sámi areas were invited to participate. Thirty-one of the latter agreed to take part in in-depth interviews. Based on the principles of breadth and variation within the inclusion criteria, an

interview sample was formed from those who had accepted to be interviewed. One interview was excluded from the sample due to a faulty tape-recording. Thus, the total sample consisted of 30 participants, representing 29 interviews.

The interview sample

The sample consisted of 30 bereaved: 20 women and 10 men. The majority was between 35 and 55 years (mean age 46 years). The interviewees were indigenous Sámi (n=10), Norwegians (n=10), multi-ethnic Sámi-Norwegian (8) and two with minority Kven affiliation. They all lived in various Sámi areas of Norway, one in a town and the rest in coastal and inland rural localities. The majority of the participants had lost children (20), while others had lost siblings (5), parents (2) or nephews/nieces (3). Some deceased were represented by one participant and others by two, e.g. both parents, two siblings, or a parent and an aunt/uncle. The deaths were caused by suicides (8), accidents (9), sudden infant/child deaths (2), and homicide (1). Mean time since loss was 3 years, and ranged from 1.5 to 10 years. (The inclusion criteria number 3, time since loss, was not used in a strict manner accepting cases up to ten years).

The interviews

Twenty-nine interviews (one couple was interviewed together) were conducted between April 2010 and April 2011. An interview guide based on previous research (Dyregrov, 2003) was further developed and adapted to the Sámi and Northern Norwegian culture by the project group. The interview guide for the whole study consisted of themes connected to the two main research questions and sub-questions: 1a) What kind of help and support had the bereaved received/been offered from the public assistance scheme, and their natural social networks? 1b) What were their needs for help, e.g. in the long-term? 2a) What had been the process of bereavement and coping in their cultural context? 2b) What had been helpful in order to adjust to the dramatic loss? 2c) Was religion and/or folk religiosity helpful and if so how? The analysis of this article concerns theme 2c.

The second and third authors conducted the interviews. As neither spoke Sámi fluently, the Sámi participants were offered an interpreter before the interviews. However, all participants refused the offer as they considered themselves to be bilingual and preferred to speak Norwegian instead of having a third person in the setting. Two options were presented as a location for the interviews, either the participants' homes (24) or a local government office (5). The interviews were completed individually,

except for one where the spouses agreed to be interviewed together. The length of the interviews varied between 65 to 270 minutes (120 minutes on average). The interviews were completed in one session, except for one interview that was conducted in three parts because of practical and emotional reasons. All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by two trained transcribers. The data material consisted of 845 pages (12 point, single-spaced). The transcripts were de-identified to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Analysis

A hermeneutical-phenomenological approach was used to explore the importance of how religiosity and folk religiosity can help bereaved in Sámi areas. The analysis proceeded through the following steps (Kvale, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003): 1) All the interviews were read to get an overview of the material and main issues. 2) The transcripts were read through carefully and quotes that dealt with or were related to religion and folk religiosity were identified as meaning units for further analysis. 3) The meaning expressed in the units was condensed into more essential meanings. 4) The condensed meaning units were categorized (for example prayers, memorial services, Christian traditions, Sámi traditions, contact with the other side, faith). 5) Based on the contents of the categories from all the interviews, logical connections were made, and the categories were sorted into general themes. Importantly, the process of analysis constantly alternated between parts of the data material (parts and units from individual interviews) and the whole (patterns of meaning across interviews).

Findings

Three major themes of importance for religious coping were found: *Rituals, After death communication, and Signs and warnings*. Many of the participants lived in communities strongly influenced by Laestadianism, and some were committed to the traditions of Laestadianism and other Christian denominations. For the majority of the participants folk religiosity had been important for coping strategies previous to the deaths, or became important after the sudden loss of their loved ones. Only few of the participants were not religiously or spiritually committed. For these participants other elements in life were important in coping with the sudden loss of a close person. There were no differences across geographic areas, gender, or ethnicity in relation to the two first themes, but in the last theme most of the descriptions came from the Sámi participants.

Rituals

All the participants described various kinds of public and private rituals that were performed in order to remember the deceased. Such rituals helped the participants to remember, pay respect, and keep the deceased present.

Candles were important components in almost every ritual, e.g. in the funeral and memorial ceremonies, when time was spent with the deceased before the funeral and at the cemetery. Many of the participants kept a photo of the deceased at home with a lit candle beside. The photo was usually given a place on its own in one of the main rooms in the house. This was not meant to be an altar to worship the deceased, but a way to remember, pay respect, and keep the deceased present in the family.

The participants performed several rituals from the time of death until the funeral, such as candlelight ceremonies and different ways of spending time with the deceased. Many participants emphasized the importance of time with the deceased. Although it is the routine in Norway to keep the deceased in hospitals, infirmaries or chapels until the funeral, some of the bereaved kept the deceased at home from the time of death until the funeral. Others kept their deceased at home the night before the funeral, and some described this as a Sámi tradition. One mother related that when they had their daughter at home this last night, they had to ensure that family members always stayed together with her. The family members sang songs together, the mother sang hymns, and all night there were lit candles. Although the mother described this as an emotionally demanding experience, it was also an important and positive experience that helped in coping with the situation.

Some of the participants described prayers and hymns as something to hold on to through crises and difficult times. The participants explained that they used prayers, both related to the Christian God or Jesus and/or to another universal greater power, to receive help and release the pain. Some would use prayers to serve as an anchor in life or when lacking someone to talk to: "I don't have many people to talk to about this. So, I pray, I pray, I usually pray. I use prayer".

Many of the participants visited and created rituals around the place of death. These sites were described in various ways. If it was outdoors, by the road, by the sea or by the river, the participants went to these places and put down flowers and lit candles, and spent time there. Some of the deceased died by suicide at home. In these circumstances their relation to the place of death was complicated, especially if the parents had found the deceased. The home would forever remind them about the suicide. A

father got the priest to come to make a blessing in the room where his daughter had died by suicide:

I wasn't able to go in there. I was terrified and had avoided the room. However, he (the priest) made me go and we had a touching and positive time there. It was the way he took his time, and changed his clothes and put on a proper priest robe, which gave me this inner peace and allowed me to go in there. I could see that this was going to happen in a proper way, and he actually wanted this for us. It was only the three of us (the parents and the priest) and suddenly I got this incredible peace inside of me, an incredible peace. It was beautiful... it was so beautiful...yes, with the candle lit. He did his part, and then we sang and were in peace. He was so calm, his movements were slow, and he showed respect. This was so helpful..., that he made me go in there, and the way he did it, completely calm. It was amazing.

Almost all the bereaved described the cemetery and the grave as an important place that they frequently visited, especially early in the aftermath of the deaths. Despite the tradition in some Sámi areas of not visiting the cemetery too often, participants from these areas also frequently visited the grave of their lost ones. A mother stated that, just as other parents put their children to bed, she went to the grave in the evenings to sing for her deceased little son and wish him good night.

After-death communication

About half of the participants described a direct or indirect communication with the deceased. The participants described the phenomena in a variety of different ways such as through sensations, sounds, visualizations, visits by wild animals or birds, or by particular natural phenomena.

The most common descriptions of after-death communication were a sensation and feeling of presence of the deceased. It could be a physical sensation on the skin or a general sensation of presence, and it was often followed by a message from the deceased, e.g. that he or she was fine. One participant said that she felt the odor of her deceased mother on her fathers' deathbed, with the explanation that she was there to retrieve the father. Some participants described their children's stories of visits from their deceased siblings or relatives, or that the children saw the deceased together with other living family members. Other participants described that the deceased sometimes came to visit the bereaved in their dreams to tell them that they were

fine. This did not scare them or wake them up; rather, it was a comfort.

Several participants had been in contact with the deceased through mediums where they got a message from the deceased. In addition, one father recounted what he called an "angel letter" that the parents suddenly received after their daughter's death. This was a letter from an unknown person from another part of the country, who claimed she had a message from the daughter through meditation. The letter consisted of information that was consistent with the daughter and her life and the letter also included greetings to different persons that this unknown person could not possibly have known, according to the father.

Some bereaved stated that a sudden, unexpected (unnatural/violent) death implies that the deceased has a "long way to go to get peace in the spiritual world", and may remain in the intermediate stage between reality (earth) and death (underworld). In some instances, the deceased do not receive peace because the bereaved had difficulty in struggling with the loss. A deceased uncle expressed it this way: "We must look up and appreciate life. If we refuse to move forward, it won't be good for the boy. He gets no peace, unless we feel good".

Common to the various after-death communications was the importance they had for the participants in the grieving process. The experience particularly had the ability to ease the emotional pain of the loss and to give a kind of peace to the participant. One grieving aunt described it as a comfortable calmness that still continued, mainly because she had learned that her dead nephew was fine where he was. She also described her own observation of her brother who lost his son: "However, after he got that message, that 'I am fine' and other things... it was just like he got another life afterwards. It started to move forward. You could see it, life went on". One father elaborated on his pain after having received a message from his deceased daughter:

.. and that made the intense pain in my chest, and the element of shock and so on, ease up a little, and after a while I thought, there must be something more, a spiritual dimension, I mean, on the other side, and that it's okay that her body's lying in a coffin at the cemetery, because her spiritual energy is somewhere else.

Another father talked about the transparency between the visible and invisible world: "...and in this way the deceased are still with us and you can both pray and ask for help from them".

Signs and warnings

The third main theme of importance for coping was signs and warnings through phenomena in nature. This could be a special light in the sky, as expressed by a mother who lost her child:

I looked up at the sky, which was red, this was February, the light which shines is red, and it was so beautiful. And right then it felt like a gasp. This was Jonas, and he was fine. This was a kind of sign, as I understood it, this is Jonas. It's Jonas smiling to me. It was a very clear form of contact.

Another example of signs and warnings was the aurora borealis shaped like a cross in the sky. The parents interpreted the cross as if their deceased little son was looking down, telling them that he was fine and that it was those left behind who felt pain and sorrow. Some participants described signs and warnings as a natural part of their life, often closely connected to nature. Several of the participants had received signs and/or warnings in advance of the death. This could be a sign in nature, a dream, or an unusual thing that the deceased had verbalized or done before he or she died. The sign could also be related to specific feelings that something was wrong the days before the death. According to the participants, reading signs in nature was about paying attention to the signals that nature gives. It was e.g. birds, fishes, animals, or trees that gave signals and clues about things that were going to happen. A father elaborated on this phenomenon:

Nature is a part of us, we are also animals, and animals read nature... Nature tells us about things, but if you don't notice it, you don't notice it. But if you do notice it and then analyze it in retrospect then you may start noticing things in nature. (..) I pay attention to signals, and signals hold true. Perhaps in Sámi society we are good at this. We have been part of nature, lived in nature, and have been living in harmony with nature for a very long time.

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to explore whether and how religiosity and folk religiosity are important in the coping process after sudden and unexpected death in Sámi areas in Norway.

Our findings concur with previous studies, indicating that religion and spirituality are important and helpful in the bereavement process after sudden death (Becker et al., 2007; Marrone, 1999; Wortmann & Park, 2008b). Furthermore, the results indicate that

the Sámi traditional worldview and values are still parts of modern bereavement processes. The findings will be discussed in relation to: a) the pre-Christian Sámi worldview, and b) the function of a safe place to grieve and the significance of accepting death. In this paper, culture is related to how people experience, understand, and communicate their reality as a basis for social action (Geertz, 1993 (1973)).

Bereavement in Sámi areas in relation to the pre-Christian Sámi worldview

Our findings indicate that folk religious coping strategies are common in the bereavement process among bereaved people in Sámi areas, and that they are expressed in different ways through rituals, after-death communication, signs, and warnings. The use of folk religious coping strategies is in accordance with other studies of Sámi indicating that traditional folk religiosity is present in modern times and that it exists integrated and/or in parallel with Christianity (Myrvoll, 2010; Sexton, 2009). In the literature the phenomena of after-death communication is termed extraordinary experiences (e.g. Parker, 2005). In the context of Sámi communities, after-death communication is not necessarily experienced as extraordinary, but rather as a part of everyday life. According to the traditional worldview, death did not mean the end of a person's existence, but a transition to a different relationship between the living and the dead (Myrvoll, 2010). The deceased continued to live in their world (underworld) and could be of help and benefit for the persons still alive. Furthermore, after-death communication seems to reconstruct and create a new meaning in the bereavement process, assisting the bereaved to adapt to a new life without the deceased.

In many Sámi areas there are traditions of determinism, both from the traditional worldview and the Christian saying "the day we die is predetermined the day we are born" (Kristiansen, 2005). Believing in a greater plan and purpose is found comforting (Wortmann & Park, 2008a) and it provides an opportunity to create meaning. Central in grieving is the process of reconstructing and creating a new meaning in life (Keese et al., 2008). The profound loss from sudden death challenges the coherence of the bereaved individuals' existing beliefs about themselves and the world (Neimeyer, 2005). The individual and cultural belief system may be regarded as a "myth" - a constellation of beliefs, feelings, images, and rules that operate largely outside the conscious awareness, yet nevertheless influence how the individual interprets sensations, construct new explanations, and direct behavior (Parker, 2005). This serves as a lens that gives

meaning to every situation one meets and determines what one will do in it (Feinstein & Krippner, 1997).

Religion and spirituality offer powerful ways to address existential questions that arise in the face of death and create new meanings for a loss experience (Wortmann & Park, 2008b). According to Johnsen (2007) today many Sámi have become more detached from the traditional belief system, closeness to nature and ecological balance. In the encounter with loss and suffering, many of the bereaved may find themselves in a process of revitalizing their roots and traditional worldview. The experience and use of signs and warnings among the bereaved is in accordance with the Sámi worldview where humans are close to nature and part of a greater universal whole (Kristiansen, 2006). Our interpretation of these descriptions was that the signs and warnings are verifications of the interconnectedness with nature, earth and universe in addition to their importance in the bereavement process. For many of the participants the after-death communication was also an important event in their own religiosity development. Some of the participants described themselves as non-believers before the experience of after-death communication. However, after the experience they were more certain about the existence of after-life and they considered them self as spiritual beings and believers, even though they did not feel affiliation to church. Religion and spirituality offers powerful ways to address existential questions that arises in the face of death and creates new meanings for a loss experience (Wortmann & Park, 2008a).

In accordance with findings by Parker (2005), our results indicate that after-death communication also created a continuing bond with the deceased, described as adaptive in the grieving process. The relationship between continuing versus relinquishing bonds and adjustment to bereavement is complex (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010). Today researchers in the field of bereavement have abandoned the claim that the recovery or completion of grieving involves relinquishment of the attachment and bond to the deceased (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006; Parker, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2010). Bereaved people suffering from complicated forms of grieving will need to work towards more adaptive ways of either continuing or relinquishing their bond with the deceased depending on their individual attachment styles and the duration of bereavement (Stroebe et al., 2010). However, for many with complicated grief patterns a continuing bond with the deceased may be mal-adaptive (Neimeyer, 2005). It keeps the bereaved detached from ongoing life unable to move on in life filled with bitterness and anger unable to accept that

death has occurred (Neimeyer, 2005). In this situation a need for letting go and relinquish the bond by replacing it in a symbolic relation to the deceased seem necessary to be able to adjust to the loss. Sudden and unexpected death is associated with a higher risk of complicated grief (Neimeyer, 2005). However, almost all of the participants with an after-death communication experience in this study described it as positive, mainly because of the knowledge that the deceased was at peace, and secondly because it enabled a continuation of the bond, which was helpful in their adjustment to the loss. As previously discussed, the phenomena of after-death communication and a subsequent continuing bond with the deceased can be considered as culturally appropriate in Sámi areas in Norway.

The function of a safe place to grieve

All the participants described different types of rituals as important and helpful elements in the grieving process. Reeves (2011) defines a death-related ritual as a ceremony directly involving at least one person and a symbol of the loss. The analysis revealed that the rituals had two main functions: to create a safe place for the grieving process and to achieve acceptance.

The first main function of the rituals was to create a safe place, a phenomenon previously described by Reeves (2011) as a place for the participants to grieve, express emotions and feel the pain of loss. In general, many of the participants spent a great deal of effort to avoid the intensive and overwhelming pain of the loss by suppressing it or denying that death had occurred. In this context, rituals provided predictability; they had a beginning and an end that created a safe environment to grieve. The rituals allowed the participants to open up and get closer to the deep pain of the loss. The experiences with rituals were both peaceful and pleasant, but at the same time also painful. In addition, rituals play an important role in restoring some kind of order and predictability in the chaotic situation that arises in the wake of unnatural death (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998).

The significance of accepting death

The intersection point between pain and serenity created by the rituals appeared to be essential in the process of accepting death, i.e. the second main function of rituals: they helped the participants towards an understanding and acceptance that death had occurred. Our finding is consistent with Gennep's (1960) description of how rituals in general help participants to cross thresholds from one status to another, for instance from spouse to widow. In this manner, the death rituals help the

bereaved to progress in the process towards acceptance of death and adaptation to the new situation without the deceased (the new status). Our analysis revealed that after-death communication was another pathway to acceptance. Getting the knowledge that their loved one was at peace had an all-important meaning for them and made it easier to grasp the fact and accept that death had occurred. For some of the participants the after-death communication became a turning point in the grieving process where life went forward again as they started to accept what had happened.

Acceptance is an important part of the grieving process to integrate the death and adjust to a new life. Without some degree of acceptance it is difficult to achieve an adaptive outcome of grief and it may imply a higher risk for a complicated grief process (Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2005). According to the dual process model of coping with bereavement, in the loss-orientated process one is in denial to avoid the pain of the reality (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). To achieve an adaptive outcome it is necessary to alternate between the two tracks, the loss-orientated and restoration-orientated, and gradually spend more and more time in restoration-orientated tasks (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). For some people with complicated grief patterns a continuing bond with the deceased may be maladaptive (Neimeyer, 2005). In this situation a need for letting go and relinquishing the bond by replacing it with a symbolic relation to the deceased seems necessary to be able to adjust to the bereavement situation. However, our results indicate that the religious dimension was helpful for many of the participants to accept the death and achieve the restoration-orientated coping.

Clinical implications

For most of the participants, folk religious coping strategies were important in the bereavement process and helpful in adapting to a new situation worth living. In general, religion and spirituality is often a non-topic within the health care system. In addition, after-death communication and healing traditions may be experienced as challenging to talk about for different normative reasons, being considered secret and/or taboo. Since after-death communication may be a relatively frequent phenomenon among both Sámi and Norwegian bereaved in Sámi areas in Norway, it is important that the health care system, in addition to general knowledge about bereavement, has a culturally sensitive approach and local knowledge. This will ensure that the experiences of bereaved people are met in an appropriate manner and not merely categorized as psychotic symptoms or delusions.

Conclusion

Religiosity may be a great resource of help in the grieving process of the bereaved, and especially coping strategies based on local culture as it is integrated in everyday life. As many people bereaved by sudden and unexpected death face a deep existential crisis, the folk religious coping strategies may become important in order to find a safe place to grief, to accept death and adjust to the new situation. It is important that health care personnel are culturally sensitive and acknowledge the experience and significance of religiosity in the bereavement process. Our results indicate that health workers in Sámi areas should be aware of, accept, and possibly encourage the use of religiosity and folk religious coping strategies for the bereaved, as they may benefit from them in the grieving process.

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