

Continuing Bonds Theory in Counselling: Tending Relationships to the Dead

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Abstract

Grief and loss are universal experiences that each person will endure over the course of their lifetime. Despite this universality grief can be a difficult topic for many people to work with, and social stigma can lead to individuals feeling that their grief is unwelcome or that there is something wrong with them for experiencing grief. Continuing bonds theory is a way of working with grief which invites individuals to form connections with their lost loved-ones. This theory acknowledges that death does not mean the cessation of love or connection, and seeks to build ways for individuals to connect with people they have lost. This paper speaks to some of the ways that this theory works with grief and how we as counsellors can work to de-pathologize grief in our practice and help individuals to form healthy connections. This paper shares some potential avenues for further exploration with regards to how counsellors can support individuals with grief that is not only attached to death-related loss and makes recommendations for further research with regards to cultural applications and using continuing bonds with complicated grief.

Keywords: Grief, Loss, Continuing Bonds, Shadowloss, Disenfranchised Grief.

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For Lady Chris, and for Grandma, who would be so proud it makes my heart ache.

i carry your heart with me (i carry it in
my heart) i am never without it (anywhere
i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done
by only me is your doing, my darling)

i fear

no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

- e. e. cummings

Definition of Terms

Complicated grief/prolonged grief disorder: A diagnosis for traumatic, prolonged, or persistent grief, defined within the DSM-V-TR as a disorder following the death of a family member or close friend (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Continuing bonds: A theory of grief which is defined as the presence of an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person (Klass, 1996).

Disenfranchised grief: Loss that is socially minimized or not openly acknowledged. “Grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned, or publicly mourned” (Doka, 1989, p.4).

Pathology/Pathologizing: To treat something as being psychologically abnormal and as though there is something wrong with someone, suggesting a need for treatment (McLean et al., 2022).

Shadowloss: A loss *in* life, rather than a loss *of* life, such as divorce, leaving one’s home country, loss of memory, etc. (Imperi, n.d.).

Social location: A combination of identity factors which acknowledge an individual’s place within social hierarchy, the power and privilege they hold, and the nuances of their identity which impact both how they are perceived and how they are impacted by the world around them (Anthias, 2013).

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Chapter One: Tending Relationships to the Dead

One of the only guarantees in life is that we will experience loss. We lose people and things of significance to us to death and decay; we lose pieces of ourselves to time and circumstance. Despite this fact, many people struggle to discuss grief and loss and have great discomfort with the topic of death (Von Blanckenburg et al., 2021). This discomfort leads to many individuals who have faced a major loss in their life experiencing themselves as unaccompanied and under-supported through that loss; surrounded by loved ones who want to make them feel better without making space for them to experience their grief and heartache. The perception of a grieving individual's wellbeing is often skewed toward supportive people in their life looking for whether or not the griever is 'coping' or 'working through' their loss, but without allowing the necessary space to simply be with one's loss (McLean et al., 2022). When people do not feel comfortable discussing the loss itself, grieving individuals have no place to bring their grief, no room to discuss the ways that their grief might shift and change over time, and perhaps most painful: nowhere to bring the memory of what has passed on.

This paper does not only focus on the grief experience, but rather holds a broader focus on life after loss. This paper considers how individuals maintain relationships to the people they have lost, and what changes might occur when the deceased is being related to as a multifaceted person in the minds and heart of the living, rather than being frozen in time. This paper seeks to understand what might happen when we allow ourselves to be accompanied throughout our lives by the living memories we hold. We carry the memory of our loved ones with us as we move forward through life, and they are present with us in varying degrees throughout the remainder of our lives (Rawson, 2004).

This chapter begins by sharing the guiding questions that have shaped this research, then by acknowledging my own positionality and relation to the topic at hand, and

acknowledge my own experience and bias. I will then go on to highlight the importance of counsellor comfort with grief and loss and how this contributes to the counselling field. I will examine societal grief pathology, and how current counsellor education contributes to the social pathology of grief (Hill et al., 2018; McLean et al., 2022). Then, I will introduce the concepts of disenfranchised grief and shadowloss (Thompson & Doka, 2017; Imperi, n.d.). I will outline and define continuing bonds theory (Klass, 1996), which serves as the main theory through which this paper examines grief work, as well as introducing the other theoretical frameworks that guide this paper. Finally, I will speak to how I intend to move forward with these concepts in the coming chapters.

Guiding Questions

In order to write about such a universal topic as grief and loss it is important to clarify the specific parameters which this paper will explore so as not to imply that this paper can reasonably cover the entire scope of grief and loss, nor all the ways of working with these concepts. Throughout the paper we will utilize the following guiding questions as a jumping-off point from which we can anchor curiosity and which has guided my choice of sources, language, and understanding. These questions are not intended to lead us toward specific answers, but rather to invite consideration, and to clarify the direction of this research.

My primary question in conceptualising this paper was: *how might grief be able to change when we acknowledge nuanced, enduring connection with the deceased?* This question stayed in my mind throughout the duration of this research and underscores this work as a whole. In order to better understand some of the many factors which affect this question, some secondary questions which guided my research were: *How does the social construction of grief play into its expression socially, privately, professionally, and culturally? How does the field of counselling directly or indirectly influence individual's experience of grief? What are the limitations of or risk factors associated with continuing*

bonds? These questions guide the second chapter of this paper and played a major role in my search for sources to weave into this paper. My final chapter will be guided by the question: *What are the potential applications of continuing bonds beyond death-related loss?* This curiosity informs my recommendations for future research, and considers the possibilities highlighted by the literature review as well as the areas that lack adequate research.

These questions have helped to guide my research and to clarify the scope of this paper, by making it concise and useful within the field of counselling. They also reflect my own interest in this topic and how I approach the concepts of grief and loss. It is important to note that although I have done my best to incorporate sources from many perspectives, all research is inevitably influenced by the researcher and their biases and therefore another writer speaking about this same topic could very well draw different conclusions. My hope with this paper is not to convince the reader of my absolute correctness, but rather to pique your interest and curiosity about this subject matter, and hopefully invite your future contributions to the field.

Positionality and Relationship to the Questions

I write this paper from the perspective of a young, able, queer, white person, who was not brought up within a faith tradition and was raised within a western individualistic capitalist culture. All of these identities inform my experience with loss and with death, and my experience of grief, loss, and hope, cannot be divorced from my lived experiences. In my youth I was given much free reign with belief and wonder about the world and how we show up within it. I have reckoned with loss and grief in many ways, both when a death was involved and when it was not. I believe that grief is a topic that many individuals struggle to engage with, but that holds a microscope to our own innerworkings and beliefs. I find myself called toward this topic, and believe that if grief is something that you *can* sit with then it is important that you *do*. My grief has taught me to be open and honest with my feelings and

thoughts, and to share deeply with those I hold dear; it has taught me to trust myself and to be daring, and reach for what I want in this life.

During this Masters of Counselling program, we have received one course on grief and loss which focused mainly on grief associated with loss through death. During one of our residencies, we were asked to make a list encompassing every loss we had ever endured. The losses that showed up on my list spanned many different kinds of death: death of relationship, of identity, of people, of trust. With the losses splayed out before us, we were told to pick one of our many griefs to discuss with a classmate. I found that the loss that felt most sharp to me in that moment did not have to do with the end of a life, but with the cessation of trust in an important person in my life. I was surprised to find it more challenging to speak about this loss than if I had spoken about any of the literal deaths in my lived experience. In my experience we cannot qualify the scope of a loss until we are able to sit with it. Sitting with this loss made me realize it's impact, and I was able to see clearly what had been lost by not being able to acknowledge the grief that lived within this seemingly innocuous memory. From this experience and many others, I am able to say with certainty that by giving attention and care to the grief in our life, we can begin to form new relationships with those moments that hurt us. By not treating the moment as something frozen in time we might be able to see some new angle, or access some new compassion.

I have had complicated experiences with death throughout my life, and though I think I have a fairly healthy perspective on death, it has not meant that I've been able to skip the murky places that grief lives in. I have experienced loss where things went unsaid, where I carried anger and resentment, where I felt I wasn't allowed my grief, where I was told I wasn't grieving enough, where I grieved alone; each of these complex losses has been made lighter by allowing myself the space to consider the door not closed, the space to decide that I am allowed to be angry and voice that so that I can return to loving, where I can speak what

was unsaid and continue speaking it for the rest of my days. These complex losses have utterly changed the way I relate to my life now, and though I do not expect that is possible for all people (and certainly not for all losses), I do believe that by allowing the door to remain open we give ourselves the chance to find out.

Purpose Statement

Grief and loss are widely considered to be stages in an individual's life which will pass or soften with time, something to be endured or 'worked through' (McLean et al., 2022). This paper seeks to examine grief – both related to death and to other kinds of loss – in terms that do not seek to minimize its impact throughout a lifetime. Without stigmatizing or pathologizing grief, I want to look at how our losses remain with us, and how our relationship to said losses can change over time when we do not attempt to erase them. What can individuals accomplish by carrying our ghosts with us, and continuing to tend to these relationships?

This paper will examine continuing bonds theory in the context of death as well as in the context of connection to other losses such as place. The experience of grief and loss is not relegated only to losses involving death. Throughout this paper I will continue to weave in multiple kinds of loss and the ways that this particular way of working with grief might be able to foster new connections. This research aims to understand the ways that connection can create the space needed for an individual to continue relating to a thing of the past and perhaps even invite new ways of relating. I would also like to examine how areas of disenfranchised grief might be affected by inviting the influence of continuing bonds, and how going beyond merely acknowledging and accepting grief can open up new ways of relating to one's losses.

Contributions to the Counselling Field

Grief after loss is a natural process, and one that should be able to be openly discussed by the griever with whomever they choose (McLean et al., 2022). Despite the universality of grief, many counsellors perceive themselves as being underprepared to work with grief (Blueford et al., 2021, Harrawood et al., 2011). This is an important gap in counsellor comfort to address, so that we can sit with clients in the depths of their loss and not attempt to ease our own discomfort by trying to ‘fix’ what is not broken (Capretto, 2015). There is nothing broken about experiencing grief after a significant loss – be that a loss involving the death of a person, change of circumstance, loss of a friendship or relationship – grief lets us know that we are human beings who care (Capretto, 2015). This gap in counsellor comfort can lead to clients receiving inadvertent implications that their grief is ‘too much’ or somehow inappropriate, which can in turn lead to the development of complicated grief. It is important that we can work with our clients to integrate their losses so that they can support themselves beyond the help of a professional and can begin to come into new relationship beyond the loss itself (McLean et al., 2022).

This paper will contribute to the field in a number of ways, by taking a close look at grief and loss, and the relationships that may be possible after death. By examining how continuing bonds theory might be used to heal relationships where one party is unable to work with the other, and even grief associated with change in relationships might be able to be shifted by acknowledging the continuing and changing relationship that can occur within the context of an individual’s perspective and story (Klass & Steffen, 2018).

Bereaved clients often decide to come to counselling when they have lost the tangible, tactile connection to a loved one but have not found a way to connect to them intangibly (Harris & Winokuer, 2015). In asking about the ways that a client is relating to a person who is no longer in their life or no longer living, we offer them the opportunity to reflect and

consider how a relationship might be growing and changing still, outside of the loss (Klass & Steffen, 2018). This paper seeks to clarify the ways that counsellors can show up for their clients in grief, beyond the acute crisis-management that is so often the reaction to a person's experience of loss. I hope to bring to light the ways that counsellors can allow our clients the space to continue sharing about the losses, so that they can continue their relationship to the deceased. Often our story of a deceased person becomes flat and inanimate, but our feelings about living people are very rarely so static (McClocklin & Lengelle, 2016). By allowing our clients room to speak about their losses, and the space to speak about those who are gone not only in terms of the loss but also in complicated and changing ways we allow space for the relationship to grow and change over time (Klass & Steffen, 2018).

Social Attitudes Toward Grief and Loss

An individual's experience of grief is highly personal, and yet there is very little room for a grieving individual to express their needs or speak to their experiences while they are in the throes of grief. Due to the pathology that surrounds grief, there is a sense that grief ought to appear a particular way, and that grief that does not outwardly express in the culturally expected ways is in some way wrong or harmful (McLean et al., 2022). Although societally we seem to understand that the intensity of a grief experience is normal and needed in order to process a loss, we are undermined by our own reactions to grief. "Individuals may believe intense grief-reactions are acceptable in the abstract, in practice they may actually stigmatize these individuals" (McLean et al., 2022). This stigma may lead to isolation and social-avoidance of the bereaved, whether they are showing signs of intense grief or not showing 'enough' signs of grief.

Social barriers stop many individuals from being comfortable with discussions of mortality and end-of-life, which in turn sets the stage for individuals to have challenging death experiences and potentially complicating factors for the griever left behind (Von

Blanckenburg et al., 2020). Although death permeates media in a multitude of ways, when it becomes a more literal factor within our personal life the conversation changes and becomes more taboo (Durkin, 2003).

Grief Pathology

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief were created with the intention of being a resource for grievers to understand and accept their personal reaction to grief as a natural process (Corr, 2020). However, Kubler-Ross' stages have been misinterpreted by professionals and individuals alike as a linear path that leads toward a final stage of acceptance (Stroebe et al., 2017). There are a myriad of problems that arise from this interpretation that leave grievers feeling as though there is a correct or incorrect way to grieve their losses. The five stages implies that there is an end to grief, or that once a loss has been accepted that the griever is no longer feeling their grief acutely. This interpretation implies that the loss is lessened over time, which may be true in some cases, but for many individuals the losses stay with us indefinitely. Stroebe et al. caution against the prescription of the stages model due to its implications that there is a correct and orderly way to grieve loss (2017).

Given that each individual will experience loss, we can in turn extrapolate this to mean that grief is more or less a universal experience and yet each individual's experience of grief is entirely personal to them. The medical and mental health industries have examined the ways that individuals grieve and have created many ways of interpreting outward grief expressions, which has in turn created pathology and expectation with regards to how individuals 'should' grieve (McLean et al., 2022). Individuals are told that showing outward grief is appropriate but only to a certain point, that keeping grief inside is not appropriate, and grief which persists longer than a year is potentially diagnosable as Prolonged Grief Disorder (DSM-V-TR, 2022) – sometimes known as complicated grief – a diagnosis which further pathologizes the individual's reaction to loss. Cacciatore and Frances (2022) propose that the

pathology of grief in such a way is unfounded and lacking in significant evidentiary support. “Responses [to grief] vary greatly depending on individual, familial, and cultural norms, the availability of family and social support, characterological traits, trauma, or loss history, and the presence of other stressors” (Cacciatore & Frances, 2022, pp. 32). Due to the establishing of a dichotomy within grief that shows some grief as ‘healthy’ and some as ‘unhealthy’ individuals may cling to theories which do not encompass the scope of the human grief experience (Stroebe et al., 2017). It stands to reason that individuals might internalize the expectations laid upon them to ‘work through’ their grief and come to believe that grief therapy is necessary when in fact it may not be (Wortman & Silver, 1980).

Perpetuating Pathology Within Pedagogy

As stated earlier, the Masters of Counselling program in which I am enrolled offered a single course on grief and loss, despite loss being an unattended undertone in many other courses. Many counselling programs fail to offer adequate focus on grief throughout their education, and there is need for expansion of the core curriculum that is offered within current grief education (Harrawood et al., 2011). This lack of education and lack of resourcing for newly educated counsellors leads to a lack of counsellor confidence and competence with regard to this hugely important topic, and highlights a general discomfort with death (Hill et al., 2018). When a topic is not prioritized by training and institutions there can be an assumption that the topic in question is not important or is otherwise not worth prioritizing. When it comes to education on grief and loss it seems ludicrous that this topic is not one which receives consistent attention and care. When counsellors-in-training are given access to resources and courses on grief they report higher competence in the field of grief work (Hill et al., 2018). By not consistently offering courses, many institutions are not giving their counselling students the appropriate level of education in order to feel equipped for working with grief unless they seek out further training on their own (Ober et al., 2012).

The societal pathologizing of grief leads to individuals seeking professional help in understanding their own natural processes. This professional help, being influenced by the pathology which can be found woven throughout counselling textbooks and education on grief and loss reinforces the notion that individuals cannot wade through the murky waters of grief alone, and that there is an appropriate timeline to be followed (Corr, 2020). In turn, this leads to individuals losing some of their own grief literacy and sense of what is needed for them to process their loss by putting trust in the professional's assessment of their grief rather than their own knowing. This may lead to an individual dismissing or pushing aside their continuing grief in favour of a supposedly 'healthy' timeline, rather than allowing their grief to transform in its own time.

All Kinds of Loss

We see discomfort in individuals' ability to speak openly about their grief when not in a context that specifically invites it. Even when an individual is invited to share their sadness there can be social stigma surrounding how a person is allowed to grieve and *what* they are allowed to grieve. When discussing grief, the common expectation is that we are speaking on a loss involving death, however, grief occurs in many other contexts.

Shadowloss

We not only grieve the losses where there has been a loss of life, but we grieve Shadowlosses – when we have experienced a loss *in* life such as losing a job, our divorce, moving away from our homeland (Imperi, n.d.). Social context often means we do not allow ourselves the space in which we might speak openly about the very natural grief we feel about this kind of loss. The sadness accompanying experiences such as these is often assumed to be insignificant when measured against a loss involving death. As previously stated, grief is a deeply personal experience that cannot be compared and defies our expectations; only the individual experiencing the emotion can speak to whether or not they

are grieving. To briefly interweave the notion of grief about shadowloss with the pathology of prolonged or complicated grief – the diagnostic tools which pathologize grief include a timeline surrounding death within their measurements, thereby implying that an individual's grief cannot become complicated or somehow does not qualify for consideration within the field of diagnosis. This implication is directly refuted by many people's lived experience, and may even be more prolonged than the grief accompanying a loss of life depending on the circumstances (Henry et al., 2005).

Disenfranchised Grief

This term, coined by Kenneth Doka (1989) speaks to the grief experience that many individuals have faced over time wherein they are not able to fully or openly express their grief. Disenfranchised grief occurs when an individual is told that their loss is minimal, or that they have not in fact suffered a loss at all; denial of loss and denial of grief commonly leads to complicated loss, wherein an individual is unable to make sense of their loss and the grief itself becomes all-consuming and long-term (Harris & Winokuer, 2015). The concept of disenfranchised grief is intentionally open-ended, so as to include any and all individuals who see themselves reflected in the notion that their grief has been minimised or unacknowledged, or they have been otherwise excluded from the broader concepts of grief (Thomson & Doka, 2017).

Continuing Bonds Theory

Continuing bonds theory was created by Dennis Klass in 1996 as a new way of conceptualising grief. This theory made the argument that grief's natural course should reinforce and retain our bonds with the deceased rather than dissolving our bonds due to painful loss; that grief is the continuation of a relationship between the bereaved and the dead (Klass, 2017). By treating grief as relational and long-term rather than clinical and curable continuing bonds acknowledges the relationship at the heart of grief before looking at the

symptoms of heartache. Klass' theory reminds us that though the dead are gone in physical form, the memory of them forms the foundation for continued relationship and makes space for the complex, interwoven feelings that leave many people unsure of how to relate to grieving people. Continuing bonds theory has become a leading theory within grief treatment since its introduction, but we do not necessarily see this reflected within social rhetoric nor in education.

Continuing bonds theory is being used commonly within grief treatments, and serves a vital function in allowing clients to reframe their own ideas about grief (Frankford, 2017). Continuing a relationship can mean a myriad of things depending on the people involved, and on the loss, but in its essence a continuing relationship is one that is not frozen in time, one where both parties continue to engage in that relationship. Though one person in the relationship may be dead or may no longer be in contact for whatever reason, this does not mean that the memory of them cannot serve as a continuing touchstone for the other individual to engage with. Tending relationships with the dead will undoubtedly appear different than tending relationships with the living; we have to carry both sides of a conversation, and our time spent together might look quite different than before. Continuing the relationship rather than allowing it to freeze also allows space for complex feelings to arise and be worked through without the pain of completely tarnishing a relationship. A continuing relationship allows the griever space to share accomplishments, to get advice, to be frustrated, to ask forgiveness, and to engage with the departed.

Additional Theoretical Frameworks

Throughout this paper I will be drawing upon a number of theoretical orientations in order to discuss the many facets that may arise within grief counselling alongside continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996). The theories being used throughout this paper may not necessarily overlap and some have conflicting core beliefs, but I believe that it is important to

consider multiple viewpoints and schools of thought when conducting work such as this. It is unlikely that each reader of this paper will be approaching grief work from the exact set of assumptions and theoretical lens as I am, and I think it makes sense to allow for some conflict within theoretical views.

I will be approaching this topic from a narrative standpoint, especially re-storying work, as this is a primary area where relationships might undergo significant change. I will also be touching upon social constructionism, which is a theory of knowledge that posits that people develop knowledge and understanding of language and abstract concepts through their social and cultural contexts rather than individually created meaning (Andrews, 2012). I will be using social constructionism in the context of the ways that western individualist society expects individuals to grieve, as we create our own meaning when it comes to the ways that we can express our grief both inwardly and outwardly. I will also be looking at sources which incorporate attachment theory, which is a neuro-developmental theory about the development of bonds between caregivers and infants, and how attachment to a primary caregiver may affect relational tendencies throughout the lifespan (Bretherton, 1992). This theory was created by John Bowlby and has been expanded upon much in the intervening years, being applied to many facets of psychology to better understand how an attachment style might play into our life in a wide variety of ways. Within the scope of this paper attachment theory will be used to see what might happen when individuals are able to work with their primary attachment relationships, or to heal attachment wounds when one party can no longer play an active role in the healing process (Milberg et al., 2012). This will primarily be discussed within the final chapter regarding recommendations for future applications and research.

Summary

In my experience and observation, grief is a topic that seems to polarize people. I see a great deal of discomfort with grief and uncertainty about whether grief is an appropriate

emotion. In a westernised culture where we would rather not discuss grief at all, loss and mourning are left mystified and frightening. Losing someone is painful, and as a society we are not particularly good with pain that cannot be quickly and easily addressed. We turn our attention toward the tangible and light-hearted, rather than sitting with pain, and pain that cannot be solved leaves many people uncomfortable. So many people push down their own experiences of pain and grief that they may feel confronted by another's experience in a way that prevents them from being present and may even cause them to pull away.

My hope is that this paper will highlight some of the ways that tending our relationships beyond life can help grievers to feel more whole after a loss has been processed. That we can identify some ways that continuing bonds can be used for a variety of loss and end of relationship, not necessarily only loss that is borne out of death. I would like to set out some of the ways that the counselling profession can work alongside the deathcare profession and create more seamless grieving experiences that incorporate practices from each to better support individuals who are going through loss.

Chapter one has focused on introducing the main concepts forming the foundation of this paper. It has also discussed the cultural norms and social attitudes toward grief, as well as the pathology of grief and the theoretical frameworks which shape this paper. This chapter also spoke about the purpose and contribution to the field as well as my own positionality and relationship to this particular field of study. Chapter two comprises a literature review which will begin to interweave the concepts that have been discussed throughout chapter one. This chapter will discuss the ways that grief is disenfranchised by current diagnostic material and speak to relationship tending after all kinds of loss (of people, of place, of identity). Chapter two will also look at criticisms of continuing bonds – how close might be too close, and who gets to determine this? We will also look at the various ways that 'living on' shows up within these texts, and what is suggested about what it means to not only remember our losses but to

invite continued relationship. Chapter three will speak to the ways that continuing bonds might be applied to shadow losses, and as a balm for complex grief. Finally, a proposal for further research with regards to the use of continuing bonds for healing complex relationship-endings which do not involve death.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In order to best answer the question of what might change when we allow loss to live on through us rather than seeking to treat and eliminate it, this chapter will review some of the available literature about grief and loss, and the use of continuing bonds. This chapter will attempt to provide context and some answers to the guiding questions of this paper by researching some of the literature available. The guiding questions that lead this chapter are: *How does the social construction of grief play into its expression socially, privately, professionally, and culturally? How does the field of counselling directly or indirectly influence individual's experience of grief? What are the limitations of or risk factors associated with continuing bonds?*

In order to address some of the secondary questions which guide this paper, this chapter will review the concepts of socially constructed grief, and specifically speak to the ways that socially constructed grief changes how and whether individuals are able to access supports. Many individuals relate to their grief as being an individual, isolated experience due to the social story that tells individuals that although they are being outwardly observed in their grief it is not a weight which is entirely shared (Neimeyer et al. 2014). We will also review the social construction of disenfranchised grief and how grievers are told through social rhetoric what is and is not worthy of their grief (Thomson & Doka, 2017). This chapter will then go on to speak to the tensions present within the mental health worker community with regard to whether or not grief should exist as a diagnosable disorder, and how this further pathologizes grieving individuals (Ogden & Simmonds, 2014).

To take a closer look at the cultural construction of grief this chapter will review the works of Aksoz-Efe et al. (2018), Becker (2023), Henry et al. (2005), Klass & Goss (1999), Silverman (2021), Simon (2021), and Stroebe et al. (1996), who write on a variety of aspects of grief within specific cultural practices, or about grief within the broader context of cultural

practice and traditions. This section will also speak to the cultural influence of social media upon grief and the enduring online presence of a deceased person (Akinyemi & Hassett, 2021). In my choice of sources, I sought academic work which specifically looked at continuing bonds theory, or at the concepts of closeness with the deceased, and which incorporated a wide range of perspectives in terms of culture of place, culture of work, and culture of belief to be sure that this review did not prioritise one single kind of social construction.

Lastly, this chapter will review some of the criticisms of continuing bonds and some of the considerations that must be in place in order to ethically use this theory with counselling clients. Criticisms of continuing bonds were generally quite difficult to find, but in my opinion, this does not necessarily mean there is not cause to be critical. The critical pieces reviewed here by Field, Gao & Paderna (2005), Millar & Lopez-Cantero (2022), and Neimeyer et al. (2006) each speak on some finer points that are important to consider with regard to the timing and readiness of the individual when a practitioner is deciding to use continuing bonds.

Socially Constructed Grief

As stated in the previous chapter, social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that posits that truth is created by the mind, rather than being discoverable or absolute (Schwandt, 2003). Social constructionism challenges the idea that concepts such as knowledge and truth can be entirely divorced from perspective and people's understanding, which is naturally biased through experience and personal context (Andrews, 2012). Concepts of grief and loss are ones which are socially constructed by the individuals living them. Grief is deeply personal, and varies not only between individuals and cultures but also from loss to loss; Each relationship is entirely unique, so our personal construction of the meaning laden in a

particular relationship means that our grief at the loss of a relationship is not only personal but also entirely unique.

Neimeyer et al. (2014) wrote about the social construction of grief and loss, and how individuals tend to perceive themselves as grieving alone while at the same time they are aware that they are grieving under the watch and influence of their families and communities. Individuals are not only aware of being perceived by others in their grief but their concept of acceptable behaviour is also influenced by the dominant discourses which surround current grief practices (Neimeyer et al., 2014). An individual's experience of loss or distress leads to their engagement in meaning-making which can only be understood through the lens of their own current beliefs and known experiences or through the guidance of dominant social practices (Neimeyer et al., 2014). Individuals must either assimilate to the common understandings of a particular experience or shift these common understandings to include and reflect their situational personal understanding (Neimeyer et al., 2014).

Social constructionism and continuing bonds theory naturally align, as theory of continuing bonds is one which purposefully allows space for the undefined nature of grief. Continuing bonds acknowledges that each experience grief is reflexive to the particular relationship, context, and connection that the griever is adapting to, and to the ways that they choose to express their loss (Klass, 2006). The space that this grief theory allows for the individual to accept their grief without the need for pathology can leave room for the individual to make sense of their grief without the weight of a trajectory or pressure of an assumed 'correct' way forward (Frankford, 2017). This makes continuing bonds a compelling theory to engage with when considering the inclusion of socially constructed meaning both within the personal experience of grief as well as within the treatment process.

Maladaptive Grief

McLean et al. (2022) wrote about the concept of maladaptive grief responses, stating that the concept of ‘working through’ one’s grief is a relatively new one, appearing in the early 20th century and being adopted widely by many practitioners. This shift in public perception of grief left behind many of the cultural teachings and wisdom associated with mourning and bereavement such as mourning periods, rituals, and outward displays which allowed the individual to express their mourning (McLean et al., 2022). This change led individuals to scrutinize people who were grieving, and suggested a timeline to fast-track them past their grief, looking for signs they were doing well rather than ways to support and hold them in their loss (McLean et al., 2022). Maladaptive grief, then, is a concept that must be questioned, due to its definition being one which refutes the natural grief processes and pathologizes them entirely without the necessary consideration of the nuances of grieving. The major challenge with the concept of maladaptive grief is that it creates a dichotomy between what is ‘normal’ and what is ‘not normal’. Grief is not a concept where this is easily defined nor agreed-upon cross-theoretically, therefore we must be mindful of how we choose to define normalcy within the context of loss (McLean et al., 2022).

Disenfranchised Grief

As previously discussed, disenfranchised grief shows up in a myriad of contexts and poses a challenge to individuals facing loss that is not widely considered to be worthy of their grief by those around them, or their grief is otherwise judged to be inconsequential (Thomson & Doka, 2017). Attig (2004) writes extensively on the ways that disenfranchised grief highlights the failure of social supports for grieving individuals, which forces individuals to carry their grief alone. Disenfranchisement leaves individuals feeling a lack of permission to ask for supports they may need due to the judgement – whether self or socially-imposed – they might face for the grief they are experiencing in their situation (Thomson & Doka,

2017). The failures of social supports highlighted by Attig are: empathetic failure – the failure to empathize with a grieving individual, political failure – the failure of those in power to understand and defend the needs of individuals and thereby influence social rhetoric, and ethical failure – the failure to stand by people in need of support and how this reflects a lack of respect for an individual’s grief or process (2004). These failures combine into a larger social failing to support grieving individuals, and increasing the isolation and hardship being placed on individuals who are already carrying the weight of their grief. Disenfranchised grief forces individuals to carry their grief alone, by delegitimising the pain that individuals are feeling and adding social stigma around asking for support when it is not readily offered (Doka, 1989).

Attig writes about the possibility in choosing to ‘enfranchise’ hope and lasting love with regards to the losses that individuals are facing by supporting resilience in the griever and reinforcing loving memory and legacy left behind (2004). Disenfranchised grief isolates the bereaved and stops them from receiving the supports that a grieving individual needs in order to cope with their loss. Grief may be disenfranchised for any number of reasons, but the effect of enduring disenfranchised grief is largely the same and poses a great deal of added challenge to the grieving process when the individual is not able to grieve freely and openly (Doka, 1989).

Social Barriers in Grief Conversations

Kristensen (2021) wrote on a narrative grief technique that she calls ‘the politics of saying hullo again’ by re-forming and acknowledging our continuing relationships with the dead. This paper included numerous case studies of narrative grief work and examples of what can occur when we allow the memory of our loved ones to accompany and support us through our grief process just as they did in life (Kristensen, 2021). These cases show how continued relationship can be explored in the counselling context and be expressed and

experienced in a myriad of ways. Kristensen begins her paper by speaking to her own lived experience of child-loss and the intense social isolation she felt in being unable to acknowledge the presence of her child which she so keenly felt while others seemed to have an inability or unwillingness to address (2021). As discussed within disenfranchised grief, the social barriers for certain kinds of loss are higher than others, and many individuals are left without sufficient supports or with the sense that they ought not to need support with their particular kind of loss (Thomson & Doka, 2017). The social barriers faced in these situations compound the griever's experience and lead to a sense of being alone in one's grief, thereby challenging the individual's ability to process and come to terms with their loss.

Even in cases where grief is not disenfranchised there can still be social stigma or discomfort with openly discussing one's grief, at times due to discomfort or fear regarding death as discussed in Von Blanckenburg et al. (2021), but also due to the social perception that grief is a task to complete or a private event to cope with as in McLean et al. (2022). Regardless of the underlying challenge it is clear throughout the literature selected for this review that grieving individuals need community to sit alongside them in their loss, supportive places to express their grief, and to make meaning of their losses. Without such places grief can become overwhelming and may create complex mental health concerns wherein the individual is unable to find their way out of the depths of their grief without professional support.

Complicated Grief – Grief Pathology in Diagnostic Materials

When discussing the social pathology of grief, it is important that we do not ignore the ways that the counselling field itself can pathologize grief. The enduring cultural phenomenon and diagnosis of complex or prolonged grief supports the social pathology that there is a correct way to grieve and that any feeling or expression that falls outside of that might mean that something is 'wrong' with the individual (Ogden & Simmonds, 2014).

Ogden & Simmonds (2014) studied psychologists' and counsellors' perspectives on the diagnostic material for prolonged grief disorder and whether counsellors saw merit in its inclusion. They found that many counsellors were reticent to include persistent grief disorder in diagnostic material and a bit over half of participants agreed that there was concern that diagnosis would not leave room for a variety of cultural grief displays or might lead to further pathology of an individual's grief. One of those participants who did not agree shared that there is a distinct difference when it comes to grief that disrupts daily life with persistent great intensity, and that in such cases diagnosis might help those clients to receive better, more consistent care (Ogden & Simmonds, 2014).

Cicciatore and Frances (2022) wrote on the insufficiency of the updates to the diagnostic materials, which continue to pathologize grief. This brief piece speaks to the threshold of the diagnostic criteria being too easy to meet as grief is not performed in the same universally recognisable pattern (Cicciatore & Frances, 2022). Although there is not consensus on exactly how the pathology of grief within the diagnostic material should evolve going forward there is plenty of support to suggest that change would be supportive to clients and counsellors alike.

Cultural Norms of Grief

In later writing about continuing bonds Klass (2006) wrote that we cannot claim our understanding of grief and loss without locating the social and societal conditions in which that loss has occurred, as well as the overarching cultural narratives of both the living and the dead. Loss cannot be fully understood outside of its context, and an understanding of continuing bonds (or any grief theory) must be inclusive and reflexive of the context in which the bereaved and the dead have existed (Klass, 2006). Without such cultural understanding we are only able to see a small portion of the individual before us and we are in danger of erasing our client's and their loved ones' intersectional identities within the context of the

loss. For instance, when an individual dies of cancer we are not only grieving the individual, but also the context and circumstances which led to their getting sick, the ways that they showed up in their communities and family, what was occurring in the global and local communities at the time of their illness and death, the ways that that person's privilege or lack thereof interacted with the medical system or may have caused them to get cancer in the first place, and all ways that person expressed their own humanity in life; During and after the dying of this individual each individual affected by their life along with all their contexts can potentially also be important to understanding how grief comes up.

The way we culturally interact with grief varies greatly within differing contexts and external factors. Familial practice – such as how we were brought up to speak about death, religious practice – such as concepts of the afterlife or funerary traditions, cultural practice – such as how we have observed loss publicly or how our culture interacts with death on a larger scale, and social location all impact our perceptions of grief, death, and loss according to our personal ethnography. In some cases, this may mean that there is a specific script for an individual to follow within a particular aspect of their identity – such as what ought to be done or said at a funeral – but an individual's relationship to cultural affiliations may affect their engagement with a particular prescribed practice (Silverman, 2021). There is a spectrum on which individuals practice any particular cultural norm, which might also be influenced by their proximity to both family and home (Henry et al., 2005). There are many conflicting beliefs with regards to mourning practices and what might result in resolution and relief and what might create further pain and suffering for the bereaved.

Stroebe et al. (1996) spoke to the different ways that cultural context might affect the appropriateness of an approach such as continuing bonds. Some funerary practices invite the bereaved to consider their relationship to the dead as a continuing process (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018; Becker, 2023). For instance, Japanese traditions teach that the dead have not parted

ways with us but have instead joined our ancestors, which remain near to us and can be spoken to and called upon for wisdom and comfort throughout the remainder of the bereaved's life (Klass & Goss, 1999; Stroebe et al., 1996). In contrast to this, there are a great number of indigenous peoples for whom the teachings around death and mourning are quite the opposite, believing that death may bring pollution to the living and that it is imperative for the living to rid themselves of connection to the dead and any personal affects or keepsakes so as to break ties completely (Simon, 202; Stroebe et al., 1996). Simon speaks to the insufficiency of the term 'continuing bonds' for indigenous communities, where it may be more appropriate instead to consider the concept of 'creating bonds' that are entirely new and altogether different than the bonds shared with a living being, such as in the case of the Kanaké in his 2021 paper. In all cases, acting in accordance with one's culture seems to increase the likelihood of an individual adapting to life after loss (Stroebe et al., 1996). This shows us that there is no one 'right' way to grieve, mourn, memorialize, but that by doing what we consider to be right we are better able to metabolize our grief and live alongside it appropriately – whatever that might mean to us as individuals living within our given culture.

This is particularly important to consider within the counselling realm as clients can at times turn to the counsellor as a sort of 'expert'. It is vital that in the raw moments when a client is not sure of how they 'should' grieve their losses that counsellors do not suggest a course of action based solely upon our field's conception of grief but instead support clients to clarify for themselves what would feel right to them within their social and cultural context.

Social Media and Continued Presence

A new facet to consider when examining cultural practices within grief and loss is internet and social media presence. Due to an individual's enduring online presence, there is a sense that they are still there in some ways, still able to witness and be with the living

(Akinyemi & Hassett, 2021). A relatively new frontier to consider, and a potential shift to how some people living within cultures that tend to distance themselves from the deceased might see a new avenue open for continuing connection (Irwin, 2015). There is a preservation of the deceased which occurs in social media, where the dead is then able to be visited, memorialized, photos viewed, and messages can be sent to them (Akinyemi & Hassett, 2021). By keeping access open to a deceased individual's social media there is a sense that the individual is still present, and that the bereaved are able to readily access them, whether this is by sending them messages or by looking at photos and comments posted by the deceased before their passing. Grievers can access their loved ones without the burden being placed entirely on what they can recall from memory, allowing a modicum of conversation between the enduring online presence and the bereaved's memory (Krueger & Osler, 2022). The inclusion of social media is a relatively new field of study and complicates some of the ways that individuals might choose to engage with their loved ones after death. In some cases, individuals might find comfort in using technology such as chatbots to "speak" with a deceased loved one. This practice comes with its own complications in terms of how chatbots function and how response patterns might be programmed (Krueger & Osler, 2022).

Criticisms of Continuing Bonds

Throughout my research I sought critiques on continuing bonds theory, as I believe it is important to consider multiple viewpoints and avoid evangelising a single way of working with such a multifaceted issue. Critiques were difficult to find, and the main body of research currently seems to be focused on the many areas in which continuing bonds might be applicable. The few critiques I was able to find mostly focused on the variability of relationships and acknowledged that each bond itself is unique and it is therefore difficult to critique the concept as a whole (Millar & Lopez-Cantero, 2022). In my opinion there is need for further research and writing on continuing bonds through trans-cultural lenses, which I

will speak to further in the following chapter. Considering the immense number of religious and culturally-based grief and mourning practices it seems likely that continuing bonds will apply quite naturally to some, while others will be in direct opposition to religious and cultural practices and beliefs. There is limited writing on this topic but more is certainly merited as this theory comes into broader use and acceptance.

Field et al. (1999) wrote on the importance of defining clear differences between adaptive and maladaptive expressions of continuing bonds. A major difference between the adaptive versus maladaptive use of this theory is the griever's willingness to accept the loss and to no longer attempt to reclaim closeness with the deceased through the refusal to relinquish any sense of connection (Field et al. 1999). This is further corroborated by the research of Neimeyer et al. (2006), who looked at continuing bonds theory in terms of attachment and meaning-making and found that continuing bonds alone was not a predictor of lower grief-related distress. This finding supports the earlier evidence that other factors such as time and willingness to see the deceased as separate are important in adaptive use of continuing bonds (Neimeyer et al., 2006).

A paper by Field, Gao and Paderna (2005) which studied continuing bonds through an attachment theory lens, made the important argument that effective use of continuing bonds can often require an individual to be reflective and aware of their attachment to their lost loved-one, as evidenced by the effectiveness of continuing bonds in individuals who had lost their loved-one less recently. By requiring a level of awareness about the nature of the relationships that the bereaved had with the deceased there is an implied level of access to services and spaces which would facilitate this kind of introspection which may create a barrier to those who are unable to attain the emotional distance required to benefit from the continuing bonds model.

Sekowski (2021) took this research further with a study which posited the existence of two types of continuing bond: concrete and symbolic. Through this study they found that concrete continuing bonds tended to be a predictor of unresolved grief, which correlated with attachment anxiety and lack of resolution; Whereas symbolic continuing bonds tended to indicate adaptive responses to grief, resolution, and more security in attachment (Sekowski, 2021). These two kinds of continuing bonds also had specific markers of different types of closeness seeking concrete tending toward enmeshment and behaviours which sought to keep direct closeness, symbolic accepting a more indirect bond, and allowing for a degree of distance from the deceased individual which allowed differentiation and independence (Sekowski, 2021). This study reinforces that continuing bonds cannot be blindly applied to all individuals and that it is important for practitioners to be mindful of the different ways that individuals might seek closeness with the deceased.

Millar and Lopez-Cantero (2022) offer a critique of continuing bonds which posits a challenge to the idea that continuing bonds can offer a true continued relationship, given that the nature of relationships is reciprocal and requires more than a single entity. However, they argue that although the loving, reciprocal relationship may cease after one dies, that there is a changed enduring love-relationship that is altogether new. They go on to say that the ways that the dead shape us may change and shift over time in similar ways that are possible while a loved one lives, and although there is not the same ability to reciprocally shape one-another the living can continue to shape the memory and legacies of those who have passed on (Millar & Lopez-Cantero, 2022).

These critiques offer a few areas to consider within the counsellor-client relationship, and in particular it seems important based on these findings to be aware of the clients' current state within their grief and not to offer continuing bonds as a potential method to assuage a client's despair in the beginnings of loss. The importance of timing and client readiness

highlighted within these critiques is not made clear in the seminal work on continuing bonds theory and therefore adds to the discourse in ways which should be incorporated in future research. These findings are in line with similar work which examines the use of meaning-making within grief work, which clearly states that meaning-making must occur on the client's own timeline, and cannot be led or suggested by the counsellor (Stuhr, 2021). Meaning-making work, similar to the relationship-building of continuing bonds is highly personal and cannot be embarked upon while in the depths of loss while the client is not yet able to conceptualise living alongside this grief.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed some of the pertinent literature and dominant thought with regard to the social construction of grief, first looking at the socially constructed meaning behind loss and grief, and how dominant social practices influence individual loss experiences (Neimeyer et al., 2014). We then discussed disenfranchised grief and individual barriers to social supports within the greater context of disenfranchised loss (Kristensen, 2021; Thomson & Doka, 2017). The review discussed the continuing pathology of grief within diagnostic materials and the split opinions of mental health workers with regard to whether grief should be categorizable in terms of a disorder (Ogden & Simmonds, 2014).

This chapter then examined the effects of culture, location, and tradition on grieving, and in particular the ways the continuing bonds might be a natural fit for some cultural backgrounds while working in direct opposition to others (Stroebe et al., 1996). In speaking about culture this section also reviewed discussion of social media and 'presence' of a deceased individual, and how this relatively new frontier has influenced individual's ability to feel connected to their deceased loved one (Akinyemi & Hassett, 2021).

Finally, this chapter spoke to the limitations and criticisms of continuing bonds and when continuing bonds may not be an appropriate approach with a client, with particular

focus on timing for the client's own process, and whether the client is able to see themselves as separate from the deceased (Neimeyer et al., 2006). These critiques show that continuing bonds alone is not a predictor of positive outcomes for a bereaved individual, but that the individual and their loved one must be considered within a broader context and related to within the scope of their unique loss (Klass, 2017).

The following chapter will weave together the concepts of chapters one and two and propose areas for future application of the concept of continuing bonds while bearing in mind the research that has been examined here and the cautionary critiques of this approach to loss.

Chapter Three: Discussion

In the previous chapters I have examined the concepts of continuing bonds, and the societal narratives surrounding the topics of loss and grief. I have also maintained a focus on the ways that counselling can provide individuals a place to turn their attention toward their loss. My review of the selected literature demonstrated some of the ways that social constructions and pathology of grief play a role in individuals' understanding of their loss as well as their comfort with grief. This review also highlighted some of the ways that the field of counselling and psychology serves to further pathologize grief, potentially leading individuals to believe that their grief is an ailment that requires a cure, and potentially lead practitioners to treat grief as though it is something which requires management rather than support (McLean et al., 2022; Von Blanckenburg et al., 2020).

This chapter will give a general overview for practitioners who might want to integrate continuing bonds into their practice. I will also discuss some of the possible answers to the secondary question: *what are the potential applications of continuing bonds beyond death-related loss?* By exploring the potential use of continuing bonds with complicated grief, applying continuing bonds to shadowlosses and non-death related grief, and to grief arising from estrangement or relationships ended by choice. This chapter will also speak to future applications of this work, including recommendations for future research by highlighting areas where current research is lacking.

Further Research Required: Cultural Considerations

This paper highlighted the research gaps of how continuing bonds might be applied transculturally, and how this theory might be altered or amended to be culturally appropriate for a broader range of clients. The primary texts which serve as the building blocks for this theory prioritize the experiences of western, individualistic clients, raised in theology that supports the concept of afterlife or otherwise accepts emotional closeness to the deceased as

permissible or positive. Although there was limited research which acknowledged the ways that continuing bonds theory might work with or against certain cultural views, in my opinion this remains an area that needs further attention.

Ideally, further research would propose ways that practitioners might adapt and change continuing bonds in order to practice culturally sound grief counselling, and would acknowledge the myriad of clients for whom continuing bonds will inevitably be the incorrect theory and may cause harm to the client. It is vital that in our work as counsellors we are prioritizing the individual in front of us above our chosen theoretical lens, and that we acknowledge that we cannot apply the same theory to every client.

In my opinion, further research should focus on ways that continuing bonds can be used flexibly and shifted in order to fit the client before us as-needed, which will benefit not only those clients from cultures that differ from the practitioner's but will also help the counsellor to avoid the assumption that individuals within the same culture might have the same viewpoint. This research should trouble the notion that continuing bonds is positively applicable to all individuals, and should add to the research which outlines potential indicators that this theory may not be suitable. I feel it is a counsellor's responsibility to create space for a multitude of cultural experiences and expressions within the counselling room, and the significant gap in research with regard to how continuing bonds theory can work alongside a variety of traditions and practices feels like a shortcoming of the research within this theory. When considering the vast variety of writing available about this theory's application in a wide range of circumstances, it feels particularly poignant that the research does not seem to query how this theory can be adaptable and flexible for a wide range of clients.

Using Continuing Bonds

As discussed in previous chapters, for counsellors who do not consider themselves specialists in grief and loss these can be intimidating topics (Hill et al., 2018). The lack in consistent curriculum across programs may leave counsellors underprepared to face this topic which will inevitably arise throughout our practice (Harrawood et al., 2011). Therefore, it seems important to use a portion of my third chapter to share applications of continuing bonds that counsellors might choose to weave into their practice when grief naturally arises.

Continuing bonds is more of a philosophical approach rather than a method or direct intervention, as it centres how we as individuals view our or another individual's relationship to the deceased. In taking a continuing bonds approach we as practitioners are acknowledging an enduring relationship between an individual and their lost loved-one, as well as tending to the way that enduring relationship factors into the life of the individual beyond this one-on-one connection (Klass & Steffen, 2018). By adopting this theory, we acknowledge that death does not necessitate the ending of a relationship.

Application of continuing bonds in the counselling process can look like a great many things, but in essence it is comprised of inviting our client to consider their relationship to the deceased and if/how they might like to honour the bond between themselves and the deceased. For some individuals it may come naturally to connect with loved ones who are no longer living, but for many this may feel counterintuitive, depending on their lived experience and internalized narratives about grief, cultural practice, or beliefs. Bearing in mind what has been explored in the literature review portion of this paper it is important to consider the cultural practices and beliefs of our clients and recognize the times where introducing continuing bonds is counterproductive and may even transgress on our clients' cultural practice (Stroebe et al., 1996). It is important for counsellors not to introduce this concept as an absolute but rather to use it as an avenue for further exploration of where our

clients might want to take their relationship with the deceased, be that in ways that invite continuing bonds or in ways that create further separation or dissolution of the relationship as the case may be.

As noted within the selected criticisms of continuing bonds theory, timing and readiness are important factors to consider when using this theory so that clients are not seeking closeness which denies their grief or otherwise inhibits acceptance of their loss (Field et al. 1999; Neimeyer et al., 2006; Sekowski, 2021). In practice it is important to help clients to build continuing bonds in symbolic ways that support their new relationship rather than in concrete ways which attempt to regain aspects of the living relationship and circumvent the loss itself (Sekowski, 2021). There is no one way to determine how this might appear, and each client's experience will vary from loss to loss, just as no two living relationships are the same. In using symbolic connection, we create a path for clients to connect with the memories of their loved ones and to incorporate this memory in adaptive ways that leave room for their personal growth and change without complicating or threatening the continued relationship.

As discussed in the previous chapter, continuing bonds conversations can be conceptualized similarly to the way might we engage clients in meaning-making conversations about their grief. The timing of such conversations is extremely important and cannot be overstated, as we understand that both meaning-making and continuing bonds conversations deal with the concept of moving forward once the acute grief immediately following a loss has lessened and individuals are left with the question of how to continue their life without what was lost. Stuhr (2021) highlights the necessity of completing such work on the client's timeline rather than on any assumed timeline brought by the counsellor or implied by diagnostic materials, and discourages the use of meaning-making to attempt to lessen the client's suffering. It is important for clients to feel their grief fully before

attempting to engage in more cognitive processes such as meaning-making or continuing bonds, so that we are not using these conversations to bypass the pain of loss.

Continuing Bonds with Complicated Grief

An area for further research is the use of continuing bonds with complicated grief. Current research examines how continuing bonds utilized at the wrong time in an individual's grieving process or utilized in ways that seek to maintain closeness without differentiation can lead to complicated grief or can otherwise potentially cause harm to the client (Field et al. 1999). However, there seems to be little research with regards to how to adaptively use continuing bonds with clients who are presenting with complicated grief. Additionally, research does not speak to how counsellors might shift and change the kinds of bonds clients have built in cases where continuing bonds has caused individuals to avoid acceptance of their loss rather than its intended purpose. According to Lobb et al. (2010) complicated grief is essentially entwined with one's attachment, sharing many predictors with insecure attachments, as well as trauma, meaning-making, and situational factors. I am curious about how continuing bonds can be used as a balm for complicated grief by allowing individuals to acknowledge the continuing connection to lost loved ones, and normalizing the need to let go at their own pace rather than pathologizing and rushing through their grief. By challenging the assumption that individuals must let go entirely in order to move forward, can continuing bonds offer clients the opportunity to be intentional about what they choose to carry forward with them as they continue living beyond their loss?

Alternatively, when continuing bonds have reinforced and complicated an individual's grief by deepening their connection to a loved one or to a specific time in the past, is there a way to renegotiate their interpretation of the continuing bond in such a way that allows for the maladaptive expressions of their grief to shift and change? If there is such an avenue for shifting the type of connection that an individual is seeking with their lost loved-one, how can

these conversations be opened in such a way that the individual is open to change? It seems to me that there are significant needs for research with regards to how counsellors can facilitate these conversations to create an opening for a client to acknowledge the harm that can come from some kinds of closeness; This might create the space for clients to consider what type of closeness might allow them enough space to grieve and also to continue living as fully as possible. Resources which could outline ways for counsellors to navigate these conversations would be immensely useful, especially when considering what has previously been outlined with regard to counsellor's self-perceived competency and lack of training (Ober et al., 2012). Clarity and direction with regard to application of continuing bonds when working with complicated grief would be an asset to the counselling community, in particular when considering the potential harms that can be done when this theory is applied without specific consideration toward client readiness and timing.

Future Applications

Continuing bonds is a theory which has been widely adopted into use by a variety of counsellors who work with grief, but I was surprised in my research that most applications of continuing bonds appear to be relegated to use with grief associated with death related loss. This is not entirely surprising, as a great deal of grief and loss related literature focuses primarily if not solely on death-related loss. However, it is also widely acknowledged that death is not the only precursor to grief, and individuals can and do experience grief about a great many things (Imperi, n.d.). Throughout my research I was able to find sources acknowledging grief related to losses of identity, losses of place, losses of culture, and a wide variety of shadowlosses, but was unable to find indications of continuing bonds being used within grief treatment for non-death-related grief. Perhaps this is indicative of the way we conceptualize relationships and bonds as being primarily human to human, or perhaps this displays bias with regards to what kinds of loss might feel acceptable for individuals to seek

grief counselling. Regardless of reason, this gap in potential applications of continuing bonds has left me curious about what might be possible when utilizing this theory with clients.

Shadowloss

As discussed in previous chapters, shadowloss is a term which encompasses a broad spectrum of losses that do not necessarily involve a physical death such as divorce, job loss, ending a friendship, etc. Shadowloss acknowledges the grief of endings not only involving other people but also ideas, places, and objects, and therefore acknowledges the relationships that are present between an individual and a concept or idea that may feel more intangible and difficult to express. Continuing bonds focuses primarily on the connection between two individuals, but I am very curious about the potential for applications to individuals and more conceptual losses such as a loss of place. For example, what might be possible if we were able to make space for the continuing bonds between an individual and their childhood home when that home is no longer accessible to them – perhaps because it was sold, demolished, etc. – how might establishing a bond with this conceptual place allow for healing and growth for the individual? What might the individual decide to shift within their current living space to continue or create an emotional bond to the previous home itself? In such an example this may be a fairly simple task (planting familiar flowers, painting a room a nostalgic colour, getting a night-light) but the therapeutic work begins when we can create space for our client to acknowledge the loss they are feeling and to clarify how exactly they might like to invite closeness. I suspect that this clarification process is one which may be able to help clients to better understand their reactions to specific losses and perhaps begin *re-enfranchising* (as opposed to disenfranchising) their grief. By better understanding where the exactly the pain-point of our grief is located we are able to begin clarifying how exactly we might want to address and acknowledge the heart of our loss.

Each example of shadowloss invites a potential therapeutic conversation about whether and how an individual might choose to build a new connection to the subject of their grief. As with every use of continuing bonds it will be important to pay attention to the individual's readiness to accept their loss for what it is, so as not to invite the use of continuing bonds to attempt to maintain closeness to something which has passed on. The use of continuing bonds with shadowloss has the potential to open a wide range of expressions, as individuals create new connection with a wide variety of kinds of loss, and therefore some of the expressions that might typically seem maladaptive in cases of death-related loss may in fact be adaptive in the case of shadowlosses. Further research will be required in order to clarify guiding literature about how practitioners can differentiate adaptive versus maladaptive applications of continuing bonds when utilized with conceptual loss and other types of shadowloss.

Estrangement

Another potential area for future research into applications for continuing bonds is its use with individuals who are grieving relationships that were ended intentionally, such as with abusive family members or partnerships. Even when a client has made the decision to end a relationship for their own sake it can still incur a great deal of grief and pain. Part of grieving the end of a relationship (whether ended by choice or by death) is the sense of being the sole individual who is left carrying the memories of the bond once shared. Although in these cases the individual has elected to end the relationship for their own reasons, it does not preclude them from grieving the loss of the relationship. This type of grief can bring up complex emotions, and potentially lead to the individual experiencing disenfranchised grief wherein they feel as though they are not entitled to their grief. I am curious about how continuing bonds might be able to help individuals to acknowledge the pieces of the relationship that they might be grieving while keeping them safe from the individuals/relationships/situations which caused them harm. In such applications it would be

important to avoid narratives which erase the reasons why the individual made the decision to cut contact, but to complicate a black and white narrative that sees only the negatives to the exclusion of all else. It will be extremely important in conversations such as these to be client-led to avoid the counsellor potentially minimizing the client's experiences, and to go at a pace set by the client. These applications of continuing bonds would also need to be carefully assessed with regards to suitability to individual situations.

My curiosity is whether careful application of continuing bonds in cases such as these could lead individuals to be able to recognise the aspects of these ended relationships which they might like to carry forward. For example, if an individual decided to end their relationship with an abusive parent, they might experience a great deal of grief at the loss of a primary attachment figure even though that figure was one who caused them harm. Once the individual is able to recognise and accept that grief it may be possible to examine whether there is some small aspect of that relationship which they would like to carry forward; perhaps there was a favourite meal, a place, a saying, or a song which brings to mind the individual in a way that does not cause distress, and through the careful use of continuing bonds we might be able to help the individual to keep a fragment of the relationship without further engaging with the harmful person. Just as in cases where the other person has died, we can no longer access reciprocal relationship but we can use continuing bonds to heal the pain of the absence. In my opinion, the use of continuing bonds in cases such as these might be able to help clients achieve a sense of closure when the relationship has been severed, and may allow them to reclaim a fragment of meaning from an otherwise clouded experience.

Research with regards to this potential application would need to carefully consider the timing and readiness within clients so that the use of continuing bonds theory would not cause further harm. The framing of this theory and its usage will also take important consideration and may need reworking in some aspects to suit the specific needs of the client.

It may be wise to conceptualize this application as the creation of new bonds, rather than the continuation of old bonds, or the terminology may need reworking entirely to suit this application. Continuing bonds in such an application would be entirely relegated to symbolic bonds, as defined by Sekowski (2021) and it will be important to clarify this with clients at the outset so as to avoid implication of closeness with an individual they have chosen to cut ties with. Future research should include applications with a variety of types of intentionally ended relationships, such as breakups, ended friendship, ghosting, family estrangement, and so on, with varying degrees of intensity of situation to gauge the effectiveness and appropriateness of continuing bonds in a variety of cases.

Summary

In chapter three I have examined some of the shortcomings of the research and applications of continuing bonds theory, and have made recommendations for future research which highlights cultural competencies and acknowledges the areas where continuing bonds theory will not be the appropriate intervention. This chapter also spoke to practical applications of this theory and especially highlighted the importance of client readiness and timing considerations before implementing this theory. Considering the research shown in previous chapters about counsellor's potential lack of confidence in their own competency with grief work, I wanted to offer a concrete foundation for readers to be able to see themselves using continuing bonds within their work or to offer a jumping-off point from which readers might be able to begin forming their own opinions on how they might continue a relationship with someone or something that is no longer with them if that should feel relevant or helpful. Chapter three then went on to speak about the use of continuing bonds with complicated grief, and to highlight the need for future research and guidance on this particular topic. Considering the ways that continuing bonds has been shown to potentially create complicated grief for some individuals it felt important to highlight the need for future

research to speak to ways that this might be remedied, or indeed whether continuing bonds has a place and can be applied ethically in those situations where a client has formed a complicated bond.

This chapter then explored some areas for potential future applications of continuing bonds with non-death related loss, by acknowledging that not all grief and loss is related to death, but that grief can be brought up by a great many experiences. This section questioned whether continuing bonds might be an applicable theory for losses which do not involve death, and hypothesised that these losses might be helped by allowing individuals permission to seek specific kinds of closeness despite the loss. The use of continuing bonds in cases such as these is under-researched and would likely require clarification on methodology so as not to create similar problems as have been noted within traditional use. This section also explored how it might be possible to work with the grief of estrangement by utilizing this theory, and whether it could help individuals who have chosen to end a relationship for their own wellbeing to be able to create a new bond with any memory they might like to salvage from the past so they might be able to intentionally move forward into the future. This potential application is one which would require a great deal of careful consideration and careful use, but I have a lot of curiosity about what it might be able to do for individuals who are grieving the necessary end of a relationship.

Conclusion

The guiding questions which supported this paper were not ones which have absolute, fixed answers, but rather ones which invite deeper conversation and reflection. The primary question: *How might grief be able to change when we acknowledge nuanced, enduring connection with the deceased?* Is one which has no single answer, but instead an immeasurable number of answers dependent on the unique individuals we work with as counsellors. The other questions brought forward throughout this paper served to guide

myself and the reader through the process of considering these particular topics within grief and loss.

This paper sought to understand how grief might be able to change when we acknowledge nuanced, enduring connection with the deceased. Although there is not a fixed answer that applies in all cases, it seems clear that continuing bonds can offer a place for individuals to reconcile their grief. Throughout this paper it has been clear that the social location of our clients is an important factor to consider when working with their grief, and that our work must include the broader context in which an individual is experiencing their loss so that we can work with their grief in nuanced ways.

Throughout this paper I have been curious and critical about the ways that continuing bonds might be able to support individuals living with grief. I have found that some sources have corroborated my own personal experiences of being supported by the memory of loved ones who have died, and have been surprised by some of the ways that I have naturally used continuing bonds to maintain connection to eras in my life as well as places and people who have not died but with whom I no longer contact. Grief work is something which is very close to my heart, and I am continually reminded of how much privilege we hold when an individual shares their grief with us, the memories of their loved one, the pain they are holding, and the love they carry are deeply personal and I am honoured to be able to walk alongside clients as they navigate loss. This paper has helped me to feel supported in how I would like to show up for my clients and to highlight my own beliefs about what is possible when working with grief. I believe that grief is the echo of deep love, and by choosing to sit with our grief we can begin the work of transmuting the pain of loss into a testament to what was lost.

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