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The "Double Loss" Effect:

Exploring how people react to another person's loss – the griever's perspective

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Abstract

This study intended to explore the "double loss" effect and people's reactions to *another* person's loss. When individuals negative react to a person who is in grief there is a common tendency to avoid, provide pseudo care, and/or stiff-arm. Five interviews were conducted with college students who experienced losing a loved one. These interviews addressed the phenomenon of the "double loss" effect and other people's reactions to another person's loss through the perception of the grievers. Practice, policy and research implications resulted from this research and are discussed within paper.

There are many types of losses a person can experience, but one of the most disheartening losses is losing a loved one. When a loved one dies there are certain behavioral norms that are expected, not only from people who knew the person intimately but also from individuals who are expected to be the support system. In a sense death creates a ripple effect of loss. In other words, while a death creates new crises amongst those who lost that someone, such emotional transgression does not stop with those who directly knew the deceased; it also affects those for whom the emotional impact of the death is not so immediate—for example, close friends. Such close friends can be considered the second party during a traumatic event. The strain on relationships between first and second party members after a death has not been fully recognized, but it is a critical issue within society. The reaction and grief from such traumatic events and the aftermath is well researched, yet an understudied area is the way people react to *another* person's trauma. Individuals' difficulty coping with another person's loss is important to explore because their reactions may be construed as insensitive and could leave the griever feeling alone and isolated, therefore potentially compounding the grief. It is also imperative for professionals, such as social workers, who work with clients during and after a time of loss, to be conscious of this phenomenon so they can provide appropriate support and understanding.

Often times when people experience a traumatic event, such as losing a loved one, individuals and families will look to their support systems to lean on and will find this group to be there for them. However, when those who have experienced a loss face their new life, people may find some friends have withdrawn during this time. This phenomenon is referred as a "double loss" effect. The "double loss" effect can potentially leave the victim to wonder what happened to their now absent friends. Such questioning can lead to self blame and furthermore,

secondary trauma. More specifically, a griever could potentially think, "maybe somehow I offended my friends" or "maybe it is because I have become lousy company" (Brown, 2010). Such feelings of abandonment can be attributed to the fact that there is no magic formula because people's reactions are multifaceted. In fact, there are various ways that individuals negatively react to another person's loss. Some common examples include avoidance, pseudo-care, and stiff-arming. Such reactions stem from feelings of awkwardness, survivor's guilt, and sensitivity (Brown, 2010). These and other common reactions will be defined and further explored throughout this study.

The way people cope with another person's loss is a generally ignored concept that needs to be explored because it can affect nearly everyone in society. At some point, people will both face a loss of their own and have someone close to them experience losing someone. Therefore, for both the victim of the crisis and the second party, it is important to explore the tendency for people to disappear in these times of trouble. This tendency directly and indirectly affects the majority of society.

In times of crisis and the aftermath that follows, many people seek the help of social workers. Therefore, it is also important for social workers to be aware of the potential secondary trauma that a client may be feeling. This secondary trauma is often overlooked, and it is important for social workers to be conscious of the underlying feeling of isolation. If a client comes to a social worker feeling disconnected and disappointed, it would be vital for a social worker to be aware of the "double loss" effect. Social workers would have the ability to explore with their client how relationships may have changed during or after his or her crisis. Such exploration could help those who have suffered loss understand the reasons people react the way they do and further assist individuals who are feeling a sense of abandonment. Social workers

can connect clients with support groups around this area; and as research in this area progresses, social workers can provide their clients with possible solutions and coping mechanisms to this problem. Moreover, social workers play an important role in helping the second party to understand their own feelings around the inclination to distance themselves from their friend. In other words, if social workers become aware of this tendency, they can further help and explore with such individuals their deeper issues that may have caused them to withdraw.

"Double loss" effect requires more attention to the occurrence of "stiff arming" and its effect to develop a distance amongst the first and second party members. The purpose of this study is to assess those who have experienced a loss and their perceptions of reactions by family members and close friends during this time. "Double loss" and "stiff arming" can occur at any developmental age. This study will focus on the population of college students. More specifically the focus will be on the grievers' stories and their perceptions of their support systems. This will, in hopes, answer the question: do grievers experience the "double loss" effect during and/or after their time of grief? Furthermore, are grievers aware and recognize that friends may have potentially stiff-armed them? Exploring the "double loss" effect could potentially heighten one's awareness of his or her feelings toward this concept while exploring the grievers' perception of people's reactions to their loss and discover healthy coping mechanisms that social workers can provide in practice, both to grievers and second party members.

Literature Review

There are library shelves filled with research and studies around grief and its relation to support systems. Furthermore there is a plethora of information around the potential effects grief can have on the bereaved. Many researchers have indicated the importance of understanding grievers by considering the psychological development of an individual, such as young

adulthood. One particular group that has been under the radar for a large group of grievers are college students. According to Balk (2001), approximately 25 percent of college students have lost a loved one, family member or friend, within the last year and nearly 50 percent have experienced such a lost within the past two years. The high-stress environment of college can make the grieving process more complicated and difficult. The grieving process becomes complicated for this population because of the many development tasks expected. Bereavementcan be a "silent epidemic" because of the potential debilitating symptoms and effects on how students participate in academics and social life when one faces grief (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008, p.36). A significant component for college students are one's relationship with others. Literature has shown a great disparity between the non-bereaved students and the bereaved which, ironically, can lead to isolation of grievers who are in such a high populated area such as a college campus (Balk, 1997). Therefore, the period of bereavement in itself is a difficult time for any person because it can lead to different stressors related to grieving; however, for college students who are in their transitional years, it is particularly challenging.

Bereavement-related stress

Since research has revealed that one quarter to one half of all college students experience bereavement, it is important to look at the risks of grief for the college population. One of the most serious risks includes complicated grief. Complicated grief is a psychological condition that affects 10 to 15 percent of bereaved individuals (Neimeyer, et al., 2008). It is a prolonged form of grieving that can have negative effects on one's psychological and physical well-being. Such grieving can be detrimental to one's mental and physical health due its association with anxiety, depression, and stress-related diseases of cardiovascular and immune systems (Prigerson and

Maciejewski, 2006). Some symptoms include yearning for the deceased daily for months on end, bitterness, emptiness, loss of purpose, weakened functioning in daily life roles, and difficulty adjusting to one's life (Zhang, El-Jawahri, & Prigerson, 2006).

There are many concerns that result from a loss and the potential risk factors for the bereaved. One common negative effect of grief is sleep-disruption. A study conducted by Hardison, Neimeyer, and Lichstein (2005) focused on sleep and grief of more than 800 college students. The results found the rates of bereaved college students were significantly higher than in the non-bereaved students. Bereaved students accounted for 49 percent of the population and experienced frequent awakening and a number of significant sleep-related symptoms. Results found that those with insomnia within the bereaved group reported more complicated grief symptom scores than those who did not meet the criteria for insomnia. These results reveal that insomnia and complicated grief are mutually reinforcing (Hardison, et al., 2005). The students who were experiencing complicated grief and insomnia also reported to partake in negative behaviors, such as impaired daily functioning, the dependence of alcohol and/or medication as a coping mechanism for grief and/or sleep (Hardison, et al., 2005).

Furthermore, bereaved-related insomnia could potentially put college age students at risk for possible substance abuse and decreased or lowered academic performance. According to Roy (1986), students have many emotions involved with grief that include reactions of depression, anger, guilt, and/or emptiness. Such reactions may result from the inability to manage emotions through identifying and accepting intense and conflicting feelings. Students who experience such emotions may not have the means or have difficulty expressing these feelings in the college environment in an appropriate way. Lagrand (1985) believes a common attempt to cope with loss is excessive consumption of alcohol or the use of other mood modifiers, along with the

repression of feelings for others. The Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study found that 44.4 percent of college students were binge drinkers (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). Therefore, if college students are surrounded by high consumption of alcohol for various reasons, it could be likely that bereaved college students would use alcohol and/or drugs to cope with a loss and feelings of grief. Moreover, students are constantly facing academic pressure. Kisch, Leino, and Silverman (2005) reported in a recent American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, 94 percent of college students reported feelings of being overwhelmed (as cited in Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Therefore, the psychological and physical effects of grief, for example lack of sleep, can directly impact bereaved students ability to concentrate, study, or attend class (Hardison et al., 2005).

Developmental Tasks

As a result of the many potentially debilitating effects one faces during a time of loss, loss may also lead to impaired psychological development for any given person. One's psychological development, according to Erikson (1959) stems from the belief that individuals, according to one's developmental stage, face tasks accordingly; this idea is the called the psychosocial development theory. Such tasks come into play according to the demands of the environment and society, along with constant intrapersonal changes. For college-aged students, the developmental task, according to Erikson's theory is the establishment of one's identity (1959). Therefore, bereavement can be one of the most stressful life experiences encountered by college students. For college students, Chickering and Reisser (1993) named many developmental tasks that coincide with the establishment of one's identity. Such tasks include development of competence, interpersonal relationships, purpose, integrity, and managing emotions.

The way students respond to death and cope with grief relates to the accomplishment of these developmental tasks prior to the loss. For example, a person in the middle of developing their competency in academics may perform lower academically because their skills for studying and/or fundamental intellect may not fully be mastered (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Similarly, for students who have developed their overall sense of competence may experience the most difficulty in understanding their loss (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). This study focuses on the developmental task of interpersonal competence in accordance with relationships with others. Students struggling with communication could find themselves with little support during and after their time of bereavement. Catlin (2001) argued the possible that little support occurs results from a lack of a social network before the loss and/or a negative change in trusting and liking others after the loss, which can complicate interpersonal competence. The developmental tasks of interpersonal relationships are challenged for bereaved students because relationships must be able to survive distance, separation and crises. If this mature interdependence has not been achieved with others, individuals may have the tendency to cling to others or withdraw from them (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Therefore, according to Neimeyer, et al. (2008), "bereavement is among the most stressful life experiences and transitions experienced by college students, not only because of its prevalence but also because it can negatively affect development tasks associated with traditional-aged students" (p.37). It is the psychosocial tasks and the emphasis to establish one's identity that college students have difficulty achieving because college is an environment with many transitions.

Reorganization

The challenge for grieving individuals includes achieving these developmental tasks in light of grief. The period in which grievers attempt to accomplish such tasks takes place in the

"reorganization" phase. "Bowlby (1980) described bereavement recovery in four phases: feeling numb, craving and searching for the one who died, falling into disorganization and despair, and reorganizing one's life" (Balk & Vesta, 1998, p. 26). Reorganization occurs when the person faces their "new" life after he or she has lost a loved one; this phase involves the investment of new social ties (Balk & Vesta, 1998). The grief process around reorganization consists of a dual process model of loss orientation and restoration orientation (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). According to Strobe and Schut, loss-orientation involves the loss of the deceased person whereas restoration-orientation includes dealing with secondary losses (1999). Secondary losses vary from each griever, but this study will focus on the secondary loss of support systems, especially friends experienced by the griever.

Bereavement recovery's fourth phase of reorganization, described by Feifel (1977), stems from the belief that grief challenges the bereaved to "redefine and reintegrate oneself back into life" (as cited in Balk, 2004, p. 362). Balk (2004) described recovery of our humanity as, "a function of both reframing and relearning our place in the world, our relationships with others, and our relationship with ourselves" (p. 307). For college students, in the psychosocial task of establishing their identity with developing interpersonal relationships, this reintegration is particularly important. According to Neimeyer et al. (2008), a central theme in their studies for bereaved college students was concern around reassessing their life after their world has been challenged. This study will focus on the potentially unanticipated secondary loss and trauma for bereaved college students could experience from the lack of support from peers and the perception of this loss.

College Environment

Bereaved college students face an additional challenge during reorganization because of the lack of support provided by the institution and peers. Furthermore, the college environment can be a difficult place to mourn over a loss because it is not conducive to grief. The college itself may not have the means to provide proper support to bereaved students. For one reason, grief is not a presenting complaint for those who seek health services (Haridson, et al., 2005). For example, Janowiak, Mei-tal and Drapkin (1995) argued that students are more likely to present and complain about a wide variety of issues that involve the inability to concentrate and/or study, accompanied with lack of sleep and motivation (Hardison, et al., 2005). Therefore, mental health providers may attribute these issues due to the overall stress of being a college student rather than bereaved-related stress (Janowiak, et al., 1995). Moreover, counselors may not have the proper training and education around death and grief (Freeman & Ward, 1998). Additionally, many colleges have policies for bereaved employees which do not translate to the student population. Therefore, with no established policies, students are on their own to talk to each professor about absences and make-up work. If no proper rules are in place, students are not guaranteed that accommodations will be made. Furthermore, the lack of policies could hinder bereaved students' academic performance, along with psychological impairment of repeatedly telling their story of loss to each professor (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008).

Along with little comprehensive support provided by college institutions, reorganization is challenging because of the college atmosphere itself. The college environment described by Strange and Banning (2001), is a place of mutual influence of students and the campus on one another. They describe it as a place where the college campus encourages and heightens students' adjustments, development, learning, and success. However, the college ecology can be

a difficult place for bereaved students because campuses are focused around activity, sociability and fun (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). In addition, college is driven by the demand to produce and compete and therefore campuses tend to be minimally equipped to nurture the bereaved (Balk & Vesta, 1998). The constant academic pressure and the demands of social life with the prevalence of alcohol can make college a difficult place to grieve which can furthermore isolate bereaved students in this type of environment.

The most challenging issue for bereaved students to reorganize after their loss is their lack of support from the peers. According to Chickering (1969), peer culture is one of the most powerful influences in student's development. Many bereaved students reported they had little support from their peers during their loss. In a descriptive analysis of 18 bereaved college students by Balk (1997), the majority revealed that talking about the death was helpful and that it was useful to come to terms with grief. They explained that talking about it allowed a means to maintain and invest in interpersonal relationships.

However, in Balk's (1997) study, bereaved students reported that many people around them felt uncomfortable in openly talking about their loss. Bereaved students reported the common reaction of other students were that they become overwhelmed around the subject and in fact became afraid of them (Balk, 1997). Therefore, there seems to be a large disparity between the bereaved and non-bereaved college students and the understanding of grief and appropriate reactions and actions that should be taken by non-bereaved friends (Balk, 1997). This in turn can further isolate the bereaved students in an atmosphere where they cannot share their story and speak of their feelings (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Balk (1997) stated that, "college students not touched by bereavement demonstrate both ignorance and fear when in the presence of a grieving peer" (p.216). In a non-bereaved student survey conducted by Vickio,

Cavanaugh and Attig (1990), the non-bereaved were able to identify the proper actions and reactions that are expected of them, such as attentive listening and personal presence for those grieving; however few bereaved students found such peers who were willing to listen to their story and feelings (as cited in Balk & Vesta, 1998). Barnett (1985) studied non-bereaved college students and their tendency to be unable to transform their empathetic understanding into helping behaviors "because they: (a) consider the situation places no responsibility on them to be helpful; (b) feel helpless to do anything constructive; (c) become engulfed with vicarious distress (d) lack skills to express their empathetic understanding" (as cited in Balk, 1997, p. 216). The results of this study indicated that a person may have to be encouraged to believe they have the capacity to help someone else which can result in heightening their empathy, and in fact help those individuals who are grieving (Barnett, Thompson, & Pfeifer, 2001).

Social Support

Bereaved college students' reports around the lack of support they received during their time of crisis are a feeling amongst many grievers. Wilsey and Shear (2006) conducted a study of 22 bereaved individuals who were asked to retell their story of the death of a loved one. Participants were not specifically asked to discuss social support when revisiting this experience, however, each individual mentioned their social supports during this time. Therefore, social support emerged as a prominent theme in these narratives. The results were "of the 20 participants who made judgments about the helpfulness of others, seven considered others to be wholly unsupportive, seven wholly supportive, and six described others as being both supportive and unsupportive"(Wilsey & Shear, 2006, p. 809). Furthermore, those who described both support and lack of support in their narrative, talked about poor support twice as long. The lack of support described by the bereaved participants included the support to have three qualities of

being either (a) cold/rude (b) unhelpful/unavailable and (c) combative (Wilsey & Shear, 2006). Those who spoke about existing support described the characteristics as (a) being available/helpful (b) giving affections and (c) giving honor (Wilsey & Shear, 2006). Although this study did not result in a direct correlation between support systems and it buffering the grief process and potentially negative effects, it indicated that support systems are of great importance to the bereaved. Therefore, if some supports are truly insensitive, sometimes this behavior can add more pain to the bereaved, and furthermore create a secondary loss or trauma for them that go beyond their emotional tolerability (Wilsey & Shear, 2006).

The quality of poor support reported by the bereaved gives rise to common reactions, feelings, and behaviors by the non-bereaved. Bereaved college students and other adults report that many of their friends were insensitive to their loss and often times avoided the topic and even them. Brown (2010) described the many ways that individuals tend to react and behave towards another person's loss, along with possible reasons for this tendency. Dr. Rainer, a professor at Georgia Southern University, indicated that it is often more difficult for those who are closest to the bereaved to cope because one cannot accept the feeling of helplessness (Brown, 2010). Feelings of helplessness lead to a sense of vulnerability for those who are not directly affected by the loss. Dr. Sourkes, a professor at Stanford University, states that "feelings of vulnerability can lead to a kind of survivor's guilt" (Brown, 2010). She defined survivor's guilt as: "grateful that the trauma didn't happen to them, but they feel deeply ashamed of their reactions" (Brown, 2010). When there is such emotional discomfort, an individual may avoid the person in crises. For example, such avoidance can lead to a person never letting him or her be put in a situation where they have to talk to the griever directly. The more vulnerability one feels can also lead to an avoidance of "stiff-arming". Dr. Rainer described this concept as "creating as

much space as possible from the possibility of the trauma" (Brown, 2010). Dr. Sourkes states another common reaction for the non-bereaved is awkwardness around not knowing what to say (Brown, 2010). This can lead a person to say the wrong thing, or say nothing at all in the midst of the situation. Furthermore Dr. Sourkes believes that a feeling of awkwardness stems from the societal framework knowing what should be said around grievers, yet there is a lack of transforming these words into actions. Dr. Rainer calls this pseudo care, in which often times people will vaguely ask if there is anything they can do but never follow up on it (Brown, 2010). Participants in a study of descriptive narratives revealed pseudo care as a theme in relation to their social supports. They described such care when friends/family members were unavailable or unhelpful by not helping in practical ways (Wilsey & Shear, p. 2007, 810).

There have been many studies around college students' bereavement and the way they perceive their support from others in the grieving process. Therefore, there is a gap between the bereaved and non-bereaved research that needs to be addressed in order to learn more about the common reactions of second party members in times of a friend's grief. One way to gather more information around the "double loss" effect and reactions of close friends of the grievers is to gain the perspective of the griever and their perception of friends' reactions to their loss.

There are benefits to learn more about the non-bereaved reactions and behaviors around those who are grieving. For example, a better understanding and exploration of the non-bereaved behaviors and common reactions to another person's loss could lead to a development of comprehensive support systems for grievers, not only for institutions, but also for social workers and peers who know someone who has felt a loss. It is important to note that there has been little research and studies around this area for social work. Social workers can play a vital role in helping grievers cope with a loss and guiding peers to understand their common reactions. In

particular, the under-radar population of college students who are grieving could greatly benefit from such a study so they could benefit from appropriate support, both from counselors and peers. Rather than becoming isolated in a culture that is not equipped to support the grieving process, students could rely on support systems that could benefit them rather than hurt them. To study those who have experienced losing a loved one and their perception of friends' reaction could potentially lead to more research around "stiff-arming".

To understand why these common reactions occur from social supports, this study intends to indirectly gather information of peers who are twice removed from a loss by exploring with grievers their perceived reactions and behaviors of others in the midst of their loss. Furthermore, this study will explore to see whether the "double loss" effect does occur for grievers. In order to explore the first party members' perception of social support in times of their loss, interviews will be conducted. In turn this will provide the researcher with more information around: do grievers experience and recognize the "double loss" effect?

Methodology

One way to explore whether the "double loss" phenomenon occurs for college students who are grieving and whether common negative reactions, such as stiff-arming, occurs by grievers' peers is to conduct interviews. This study was a qualitative, exploratory study that will look at the grievers' perception of support at a medium sized college in Southern New England. In order to see if the "double loss" effect occurs for college student grievers, interviews were conducted in a way that allowed for participants to freely tell their story of losing a loved one. The interviewer initially did not ask about their experience in relation to their support systems. The researcher wanted to see if grievers bring up reactions of others during their time of loss and if "stiff-arming" or "double loss" occurred for them. An exploratory design allowed for the

researcher to gain more information around the phenomenon of "double loss" effect and other people's reactions to another person's loss in the college environment by looking at the perception of the grievers.

Participants

The potential subjects were both male and female college students, enrolled as undergraduate students in a medium sized private Catholic College. Furthermore, those who participated in the study would have experienced a loss of a loved one.

It was a convenient snowball sample of students enrolled in a small private college. The researcher also recruited participants by providing a statement requesting participation for those who have lost a loved one. Forms were given to the Social Work Department's professors to hand out to four different class sections to contact the researcher if a student wishes to participate (Appendix I). The consent form ensured anonymity and confidentially of participants.

Data Gathering

To gather data, participants were asked to tell their story of losing a loved one through an interview. The researcher listened to stories of loss and to see if participants alluded to their support systems during this time. Furthermore, the researcher made not if participants touched upon the reactions of their close friends during this time when telling their story. If participants did not refer to their social supports within their story, the researcher provided a prompting question around the subject of others' reactions to their loss (see Appendix III). Near the end of the interview, the researcher defined the "double loss" effect and "stiff-arming" to the participants and asked if they have experienced it.

Data Analysis

During the interview, the researcher used a tape recorder and later took notes of each participant's narrative of losing a loved one. From the interviews, the researcher compared the participants who brought up the "double loss" effect and those who did not and were prompted by the researcher. Comparison of the two groups consisted of those participants who referenced to their support system during their time of crisis without prompting and those who did not. Further, the researcher examined the different factors that may have played a role in their experience of having positive or negative support systems. This allowed the researcher to draw themes from the different experiences college students had during their time of loss. Moreover, the researcher was able to make conclusions around the prevalence of the "double loss" effect and the inability for people to deal with another person's crisis through the responses of the grievers when asked if they have ever had an experience such as friends withdrawing from their lives.

Findings

This study intended to explore how people react to another person's loss through the griever's perspective. Specifically, it sought to discover if grievers experienced the "double loss" effect and negative reactions from those around them; reactions such as stiff-arming, pseudo care, and feelings of awkwardness. The research conducted five interviewers with college students who experienced losing a loved one within the past three years.

The interviews were approximately 20 minutes long and the participants varied in grade level. There was a freshman, two sophomores, one junior, and a senior. All participants were female. Participant 1 suddenly lost her grandmother when she was a freshman in college. Participant 2 lost her grandfather when she was in high school. Participant 3's mother died when she was a freshman in college. Participant 4 lost a teammate when she was in high school. And Participant 5 lost her best friend when she was in high school.

The composition of the interview questions provided the participants the opportunity to freely tell their story of losing a loved one. The researcher analyzed these stories, looking for the mention of support systems. Furthermore, if the participant did mention a support system, the researcher judged if it was positive or negative. If the participant did not mention a support system, the research provided prompting questions to elaborate on reactions they received from others after their loss.

Talking about Support Systems

Positive support

All five participants had positive things to say about their support system during their loss. Whether the participants referenced to the support they received with or without the probing of the interviewer, four participants initially talked about their support systems as helpful. Four out of the five participants said they felt and still feel comfortable enough to openly talk about their loss with their friends and/or family.

Three out of the five participants alluded to their support system when explaining the nature of their loss. These three participants referenced their friends and family as a means to help them get through grief. Participant 1 described her experience of losing her grandmother, "I have a really great group of friends who were there for me during this time. They provided comfort if I needed anything." This participant spent most of the time at home. She stated, "friends sent text messages to make sure I was okay and offered to talk if I needed to." Participant 3 lost her mother when she was a freshman in college and she immediately referenced her friends when she talked about the nature of the loss. She stated, "I had amazing roommates. I received so many texts, messages, flowers and presents and every year I still receive text messages from friends." Participant 4, lost a teammate in high school. She stated, "it

was helpful to be part of the team during this time. It strengthened our team and brought us together."

Two out of the five participants did not reference their support systems in their stories. These participants needed a prompting question to talk about how others reacted to their loss. Participant 2, who lost her grandfather said, "friends offered support and said 'call me if you need anything'". This participant also stated, "it took me about six months to sit down and be able to talk to them about it, though." Participant 2 said her friends were very approachable and mindful of his anniversary. Participant 5, who lost her best friend when she was in high school, stated:

> "within my community it was a lot easier because everyone knew her and knew what had happened. We all tried to do everything to keep her alive anyway possible. When I was with my friends and something reminded us of her we could completely go off with a story about her. It was helpful to talk about it and share our feelings with each other."

Three out of the five participants believed they received more support from friends who had been through a similar situation or loss. Participant 2 said she received more support from friends who also had lost a grandparent. Participant 3 told a story about a girl who was in one of her classes and provided her support who had also lost her mother. Participant 3 said it was helpful to talk to her about it because it was easy relate to. Participant 4 stated, "I felt comfortable talking about the loss of my friend with my roommate when she lost her friend too. I felt like I could relate to her, so it was easier to bring up."

Negative Support

All five participants told a few stories of their friends' inability to support them. Some participants immediately talked about this when the interviewer asked how others responded to them during this time. Others did not make reference to this concept until the interviewer explained to participants about the focus of the study.

Two out of the five participants brought up negative reactions when asked how others reacted during this time and if they felt they were able to openly talk about the in loss with their friends. The other three participants referenced some negative reactions they received from friends after the interviewer explained the common tendency for people to avoid, provide pseudo care, feel awkward and/or stiff-arm grievers.

Feelings of Awkwardness

Four out of the five participants discussed how people around them felt awkward during their loss. Participant 1 said, "I had one or two friends who didn't know what to do or say." Participant 1 continued to say how she experienced avoidance in the midst of crises with other personal situations but not as much with the death of her grandmother." Participant 2 believed some of her friends felt awkward talking about her loss with her. Participant 4 stated, "the people who weren't on the team didn't know what to say or do." Participant 5, stated:

> "within my community it was a lot easier because everyone was on the same page and knew her. But when it came to people outside the community who didn't know her, it was a lot harder. They would simply say, 'you're in our thoughts'. I can't think of a specific person who I felt awkward talking about the loss with because mainly everyone knew her."

However, Participant 5 did reference that she felt awkward around her friend's [who died] brother because they both didn't know what to say.

Double Loss

Two out of the five participants experienced a double loss. Participant 3 told a story and said, "I had two friends who were at my house every single day and always asked, 'can I do anything for you?' But now, looking back, I think they did it more for show. Those two friends who were strong during the time of the funeral and stuff have now disappeared." When the

interviewer asked Participant 5 if she experienced the double loss effect when she lost her best friend, she said:

> "it's different than it was before she died with her brother. I never really saw it, before like this but I guess that would be a person who its sometimes awkward around. Its obvious we both think of it immediately when we see each other. We do it unintentionally."

Participant 5 also explained that she believes she experienced the "double loss" with the parents of her deceased friend. "As far as her parents, it got harder. I would see her parents and immediately tear up. It's not like we've grown apart but I don't see them in person anymore." Participant 5 stated that she believes the parents also definitely experienced the double loss effect with other people. Participant 2 stated, "I didn't lose any friends because of the experience directly, but I definitely narrowed down my true friends."

Experiences of Stiff-arming

Three out of the five participants believe they were stiff-armed by others during their their loss. Participant 2 stated:

> "I had one particular friend who was usually good at supporting but when my grandfather died, she didn't know what to say. She just said 'sorry' and that was it. I think she did this because she never experienced a death. She still has all four grandparents. When I talk about my grandfather to this one friend, she pushes it away and doesn't want to talk about it. I know that its not because she doesn't care about me. It's her own feelings and stuff. I don't take it personally."

This participant also told a story of her cousins who didn't know how to react because she had not experienced a death of a grandparent either. Participant 4 believed she was stiff-armed by some of her friends as well. She said,

> "some of my friends who I wasn't as close with, didn't know what to say so they would kind of avoid me or changed the topic. If anything was brought up about it, it was sort of silent. When my friend didn't know what to say, I just wanted to be alone then, because it was an awkward silence."

Experiences of Pseudo Care

Two out of the five participants believed there were people who provided pseudo care during their loss. Participant 2 experienced this when her grandfather died. She said, "random people in my class would say 'let me know if you need anything.' I knew that they wouldn't follow up with it. At the wake, random people would say the same thing. People need to stick to their word." Participant 2 told a story about when her friend's father died she saw so many people say things like "call me if you need anything," but knew they weren't going to do anything to actually help him. So she sat down with a group of people and realized they needed to do something. She did a fundraiser and brought over baked goods. Participant 3 had a similar experience when she lost her mother.

> " I received pages and pages of emails, Facebook messages saying 'I'm here if you need me'. But I wanted to be like bullsh*t, we're not friends. It's a facebook message. Clearly you don't have my phone number, clearly they weren't my friend. The people who really mattered, like my close friends would do anything."

Participant 5 disagreed with the concept of pseudo care. She explained although her relationship with her friend's [who died] brother had changed she still knew she was there for him. She said, "when the brother says, 'if you need anything I am here', I take his word for it. If I ever wanted to talk about her with him he would definitely be willing."

Perceptions of Grievers and Why People React Negatively

All five participants gave a reason as to why they believed some of the people around them reacted negatively during the time of their loss. Moreover, three of the five participants stated, directly or indirectly, they did not take these negative reactions personally. Participant 1 stated, in regards to friends who didn't know what to do or say, "I wasn't mad at them or anything. I understand that people do it because they are unsure of how people will react, it sometimes is an awkward situation." Participant 2 said, "I don't take it personally. If you haven't lost anybody,

it's hard to put yourself in their shoes. It's hard to watch people suffer and grieve, they don't want it to happen to them." Therefore, Participant 2 received the least support from those friends who had not experienced the loss of a loved one. Participant 4 stated, "some of them didn't know what to say. They didn't mean to feel uncomfortable. I didn't care." Participant 4 continued by saying "its not something you bring up in normal conversation." When Participant 3 talked about people who provided her with pseudo care, she stated "I don't think people do it on purpose." Participant 5 believed it was inevitable to experience some people who react negatively to grievers. She said,

> "I think it is hard not to experience that and to avoid it. I do not think people do it intentionally, half of the time they do not even know they are doing it. They are just comforting in any way that they can."

Griever's Personality

Three out of the five participants alluded to their personality as being a factor for how others reacted to them. Participant 1 stated, "I tend to deal with things on my own." Therefore, although Participant 1 knew her friends were there for her, she dealt with the loss independently. On the other hand, Participant 2 said, "I'm the type of person who needs a good cry and needs things to get off my chest. So, when my friends offered to talk, I took them up on it." Participant 3's personality also played a role in her interaction with her friends during and after the time of her loss. She said,

> "I don't like to be visibly sad. I hate when people associate me with the 'girl who lost her mother'. My friends don't look at me as 'poor girl'; they say they understand what happened and with them its like, 'if you ever want to talk I am here.' If I am ever sad they know, and will be there."

Helpful Ways to Deal with Grief

Four out of the five participants referenced helpful ways to handle their loss. All four of these participants mentioned that "keeping their memory alive" in some way was helpful during their grieving process. Participant 2 did not directly refer to this during loss of her grandfather. However, she did explain that when her friend lost his father, she helped start a fundraiser. Participant 3 said that the school where her mom taught at has a Secret Santa fundraiser every year in her mom's memory and the money is donated to a volunteer corporation that she worked for. Participant 4 said one of the most helpful things for her in her grieving process of her friend was when her friend's family made a foundation in her name. She stated, "seeing the family turn the tragedy around to benefit other people gave me hope." Participant 5 stated, "I wanted to keep her alive in any way possible by celebrating her life and all that she accomplished. There was a fundraiser in her name. We did everything to keep her alive" Participant 5 also said, "her parents asked her friends to tell them stories and stuff to keep her memory alive. It's helpful to talk about it." Furthermore, Participant 5 finds it helpful to talk about the loss of her friend when her friends are going through a hard time. She stated, "I use her as an example sometimes if someone is going through a hard time. It helps me and it helps them." Aside from fundraisers and foundations, Participant 3 said it's helpful to receive feedback from others about her strength. She stated, "It's nice to hear from people how strong and incredible I am for going back to school. So many people say, 'I can't believe how strong you are.' When people say this it makes me want to keep going." Therefore, for Participant 3 she likes to hear such words from other people because it provides her with reassurance that she is being strong and to keep going on.

College Environment

Two out of the five participants lost a loved one while they were in college. Participant 1 described how coming back to school was difficult. She said, "coming back to school was hard. My teacher said, 'take your time don't worry about it'. I had a lot of catch up work but the

teachers were understanding." Participant 3 shared her story about what it was like to come back to school after her mother died.

> "Father ____ had come to my mom's funeral and ended up doing part of the service. I had no idea that was happening. I was shocked. I had only been here for six or seven months and this guy came, I don't even know him. When I came back to school, he sent me an email if I ever wanted to talk. I actually ended up talking to him a lot. Still to this day I can't believe how good this school was. They hold a mass every time someone at this school experiences a close loss. They had one specifically for me and my friends. I talk to Father ____ a lot. I didn't do the counseling thing right away, I just went straight to him. Some of the things he said I will never forget. Coming back to this school was fantastic. I was shocked. I still get emails from Father _____ checking in to see how I'm doing."

These findings provided the researcher with implications for practice, policy and research.

Summary and Implications

This study explored how people react to another person's loss of a loved one. The researcher examined the different factors that play a role in the positive and/or negative support grievers received from the people around them during their loss. Furthermore, study intended to discover if the "double loss" effect was present in these stories and if people reacted to grievers negatively through the means of stiff-arming, feeling awkward, and providing pseudo care. The research interviewed five identified grievers about their experience. Overall, participants had positive things to say about their support system during their loss. However, participants also identified one or two friends who had negative reactions during their loss.

Through analyzing these five interviews, the researcher drew themes and potential factors of why some friends withdrew or negatively reacted to grievers. These interviews revealed that the participants were able to give insight as to why they believed others reacted negatively. It is important to note that the participants did not take others' negative reactions personally. One of

the main reasons for such negative reactions was that friends were unable to relate to them if they had not experienced a loss of their own. Furthermore, the griever's personality was a factor of how others responded to them during their grief. Previous literature has mentioned that colleges are not equipped to properly nurture bereaved students which could further impact the grief and leave the student in isolation (Balk & Vesta, 1998) However, findings of this study found the college to be accommodating to the needs of student grievers.

This study did shed light on the positive ways people were able to provide support to grievers. However, these findings reinforced the notion that some people have the inability to cope with another person's loss. The negative reactions that these five participants received from a few friends around them, did not seem to further impact their grief. The main reason for this was because they did not take their negative reactions personally.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The sample size (5) of this study was small and only gathered female participants. The time at which a participant lost a loved one varied, as some lost their loved one as many as three years ago and others as early as a year ago. Furthermore, the environment in which the loss happened varied; some lost their loved one during high school and some in college. Therefore, the participants were all in different stages of the grief process. As a result, the sample population is not an accurate representation of bereaved college students. Due to its small size, the experiences of these participants and the support they received, both from others and the college, cannot be generalized to the overall population of bereaved college students. An additional limitation in this study was the questions asked by the interviewer. In order to see if participants would mention the concept of the "double loss" effect on their own, the questions were set up in a way that allowed for the participants to freely talk

about the nature of the loss. However, the open-endedness of the questions may have hindered the participants to talk about any negative reactions they received from others. Lastly, the bias of the researcher may have been another limitation to this study. The researcher knew the intention of the study and therefore the questions were designed with subjectivity.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

This study raises implications for practice, policy and research. The "double loss" effect and the common negative reactions people have towards grievers are important aspects for practitioners to be aware of when working with clients who may be grieving. It is important for practitioners to explore with bereaved clients their support systems and to be mindful of the potential negative reactions and responses people around them may have. Practitioners could also use this information to educate clients, both grievers and non-grievers in order to raise awareness around this phenomenon. Additionally, practitioners could use information provide healthy coping mechanisms to both parties in pactice. Moreover, grief support groups could incorporate and explore with group members around their experiences of how people reacted to them. The "double loss" effect and common negative tendencies, such as stiff-arming and pseudo care could be a topic of discussion in grief support groups. In order for practitioners to become more aware of these common tendencies made by other people, more research is needed on this topic. Grief and its process is a well-researched subject, however, there is a need for research to see how others react to a person who is in grief. Furthermore, a study needs to directly examine "second party" members to gain more information around why and how they react to another person's loss and/or trauma. It is also imperative for college institutions to implement student policies around bereavement in order to have a framework for bereaved college students. Such policies need to have concrete guidelines for students who experience a

traumatic loss, and they need to address issues such as: counseling, make-up work, and further accommodations.

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Appendix I

My name is Laura Bienashski and I am a senior social work major. I am studying grief in the college environment for my senior thesis. I am looking for participants who have experienced losing a loved one within the last 2-3 years. Participation will include an interview that will take approximately one hour. Please know that all information discussed during this time will remain confidential and your name and anything taken from the interview will remain anonymous. If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me at lbienash@friars.providence.edu

Thank you,

Laura Bienashski

Appendix II

Dear Participant,
I am a Providence College student and a social work major. I am inviting you to participate in a study about grief in the college environment. To study student's experiences with grief will help researchers gain more information around this study. Also, it could social workers understand and better help clients in the grieving process. Data gathered in this study will be reported and written up in a thesis. No identifying information will be included in the thesis manuscript.

To gather such data, I will conduct an interview with you to listen to your story about losing a loved one. During this time, a tape recorder will be used and the researcher will transcribe notes.

There are no anticipated significant risks associated with involvement in this research. There is always the possibility that uncomfortable or stressful memories or emotions may be stirred up by thinking about past experiences of losing a loved. Participants are free to cease participation at any point of this interview.

This interview may be found beneficial to the participants by having the opportunity and place to tell their story. Participant may feel a sense of reward to know that they have contributed to the generation of knowledge that may aid in the work with others in the future. There is no other compensation for participation.

Confidentiality of participants will be protected by the signing of this paper. The signed consent form will be in a secure, locked file cabinet, under-locked to keep anonymity. Once researcher gathers information from the tape and notes, they will both be discarded.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or to decline participation will not influence your grades or your relationship with the Department of Social Work in anyway. Below you will find contact information from the researcher in case there are any further questions.

YOUR SIGNATURE OF THIS FORM INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Laura Bienashski, lbienash@friars.providence.edu

X_____

Appendix III

1. What was your experience like losing someone very close to you?

2. How did you find your close friends reacting to you during this time?

    a.) What was it like to come back to school?

    b.) In what ways did the school and your friend help you get through this hard time?

    c.) What was most beneficial for you? Did anything not help?

    d.) Are you able to talk about the person you lost openly with your friends?

3. There is actually a common tendency for people to avoid those who are grieving (they don't know what to say, they feel awkward). Did you ever experience this?

    a.) Sometimes people don't even realize that they have "stiff armed" a person who is grieving (define) or provided pseudo care (define). Did you ever feel like people around you ever reacted this way?

4. In fact, individuals who lose someone close to them, find that friends sometimes withdraw from their lives during this time. It's called a "double loss" effect. Can you remember if this happened for you?