

Social Aspects of Death, Dying and Bereavement (DDB) Study Group

Friday 15 November 2013, 10.30am-4.30pm

BSA London Meeting Room, Imperial Wharf

Theme: Children and Death

10.00-10.30 Registration

10.30-10.45 Welcome and Introductions

10.45-11.15 **What's in a word: Language and children's concepts of death** – Rachel Fearnley (Independent Researcher)

Living with a parent who has a life threatening illness presents children with challenges and changes that are typically beyond the comprehension of others who have not experienced such a catastrophically life changing event. The news that the illness is terminal has the potential to disrupt every aspect of the child's life in some way or another. The paper will begin to explore how the language of serious illness and death may influence children's concepts of death. Words that could be associated with the emotions of dying and death will be explored through the lens of both the child and the adult and within this consideration will be given to how children might interpret what they are hearing, and furthermore, how this could affect their meaning making process. The paper will then explore whether the professionals' discourse contributes to the children's construction or de-construction of understanding and meaning making. Finally there will be an exploration of possible ways adults can help children to make best use of the language of dying and death.

11.15-11.45 **A beginning of an exploration of children's play and death** – Maggie Jackson (Teeside University)

Since the beginning of the 20th century our understanding of the ways in which children begin to make sense of death and dying have been influenced by notions of cognitive development (Anthony 1940, Nagy 1948, Piaget 1954) and although these are useful as guidelines it is also apparent that children sometimes display different understanding of death that do not easily fit these psychological explanations. There have been challenges to the notion of developmental stages of understanding death (notably Bluebond-Langer 1978) but this still remains within a cognitive developmental framework and was particularly concerned with sick children.

This paper begins to consider the ways in which young children play around the subject of death in their normal day to day lives using evidence from historical sources, literature and film. I use a social constructionist view of childhood to begin to consider how children may be thinking about death and trying to make sense of it. It also considers how the view we hold of what childhood should be may influence the

way children's play around death has not been noticed or actively discouraged.

My particular interest is in death education and how we begin to talk to children about death and dying as a "normal" part of life (Jackson and Colwell 2002). The exploration of children's every day play may be a useful way in which to help develop this idea further.

11.45-12.15 **A generative metaphor: Dying and death in young children's imaginative play** – Rachel Rosen (Institute of Education)

Dying and death in children's imaginative play is often subjected to literal interpretation, seen as evidence of meaning-making about death or a form of catharsis, and by corollary, a window into children's fears and pre-occupations. Viewed in this light, children's enactment of uncaused and reversible deaths in ludic activity is considered a 'misunderstanding' or evidence of developmental 'immaturity'. In this paper, however, I will argue that such an interpretation fundamentally misplaces the contestive and transformational characterisation of play offered in sociological accounts.

Drawing on data generated in an ethnographic study about children's death and violence play at a children's centre in a low-income community in West London, I will suggest that dying and death in children's play can best be understood figuratively. The death trope was used extensively and served as a generative metaphor in the setting, with its everyday world characteristics provoking relatively stable responses in the face of uncertainties and ambiguities encountered in ludic activity more generally. In particular, the use of the death trope made intimate, caring touch between children permissible, rather than just a by-product of small play spaces filled with many bodies.

The implications of these findings for multi-generational acts of caring in times of bereavement and death will be considered.

12.15-13.00 Lunch (provided)

13.00-13.30 **Young people's encounters with death: a normal or troubling childhood experience?** – Jane McCarthy (Open University)

Research on children's experiences of death focuses preponderantly on the minority who have experienced parental or, less commonly, sibling death (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). At the same time, the overwhelming majority of young people report experiencing a significant bereavement before the age of 16 (Harrison and Harrington, 2001). Whether bereavement is usefully seen as a 'normal' feature of childhood, however, goes beyond the question of statistical prevalence, implicating understandings of childhood as an institutionalised phase of the life course, underpinned by notions of innocence and vulnerability. Thus 'childhood' has arguably become idealised in affluent developed societies, raising high expectations of freedom to be an innocent 'child', protected from the harsher realities of life. From this perspective, bereavement is seen to undermine – even destroy – the possibilities for a 'proper childhood'. The presence of death during contemporary childhood may thus present an anachronism that makes it hard to

acknowledge. This points to the more general question of whether 'troubles', of one sort or another, might usefully be seen as a 'normal' – expected and expectable – part of the lives of young people (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013). Are troubles an endemic and perennial feature of human experience in general, and children's lives in particular, with which better preparation and more realistic expectations would help to cope? And at what point do 'normal troubles' entail suffering for which interventions might be seen to help? What are the implications of such questions for deaths encountered during the early years of life?

13.30-14.00 **'We're ok with death': Young people talk about the end of life** – Sarah Coombs (University Campus Suffolk)

This work represents the voices of 29 young people aged between 10 and 17, who volunteered to come together in small self-selected friendship groups and talk about the presence of death in their everyday lives. They placed individually chosen household objects that evoked death for them in shoeboxes and brought them to the discussion groups. The artifacts were many and varied, and elicited a wide exploration of the topic.

The study sits within the 'new sociology of childhood' paradigm; situating these young people as active social agents, experts in their own social worlds, and having rights both to participate and have their voices heard. Equally, an approach, premised upon doing no harm and a 'feminist ethic of care' were important.

Kastenbaum and Fox (2007) argued that adults assume young people do not, cannot and should not think about death. These findings challenge this notion by revealing a lively engagement with the topic from a number of distinct perspectives. Initially, media sources were used to inform young people's thoughts on, and responses to death, but many of these were challenged as unauthentic. Personal narratives of loss, and memories of loved ones revealed a variety of encounters with deaths, the stories being told in an array of vibrant, amusing and emotive ways. Similarly, death was explored through religious and scientific frameworks that highlighted the rich and changing views of these young people. Such shifting and exciting vistas are a previously undiscovered part of young people's lives and situate them in a landscape not often associated with childhood.

14.00-14.30 **Experiences of grief and bereavement of children orphaned in the context of the HIV epidemic in Namibia** – Mienke van der Brug (VU University Amsterdam)

It is estimated that 15 percent of the child population in Namibia is orphaned; half of this group is believed to be orphaned by AIDS. Until 2005/2006, before antiretroviral therapy was available on a large scale in Namibia, many children lost one or both parents to AIDS. Most of these orphans are taken care of by the extended family, and stay with their grandmothers, aunts, or great aunts. This paper pays attention to how these orphans experience grief and bereavement, and to caregivers' perceptions of children's bereavement. Research took place during a year and a half in northern Namibia with 20 children aged 9-11 years, 14 adolescents, and their caretakers. Focus group discussions, individual interviews and child orientated methods such as drawings were used. Caregivers' perspectives are based on the idea that

children should accept their situation, and believe that stop thinking about their parents will help the child to move on. Children are generally only allowed to openly grieve for a short period of time, and there is little openness in talking about the deceased parents. Children's experiences of grief and bereavement are often related to their living circumstances; children report an increased thinking about their parents when not treated well in the foster households, and mention the loss of support and attention. Children would like to receive information about their parents, but also mention their fear of nightmares when talking about their parents.

14.30-15.00 Tea and Coffee

15.00-15.30 **Conceptualising Adult Orphans** – Rosaline S. Barbour (Open University), Carol Komaromy, Bethany Morgan-Brett, & Michael Barbour

This paper reports on a scoping literature review which raises several questions as to how we define orphanhood and, indeed, the status of being a child. Can we still be considered adults if both our parents are still alive? Are there more similarities than differences between the experience of losing a parent as a child and losing a parent as an adult? The impact of a parental death can have profound consequences for sibling relationships, causing issues from childhood to resurface and blurring the distinction between adult and childhood family relationships. Loss of grandparents may also produce shifts in relationships between adult children and their own children. This all suggests that we should perhaps reconsider what exactly we mean by the category of 'childhood' in the context of parental death.

15.30-16.00 **Developing a tool to measure the effectiveness of child bereavement services** – Alison Penny (Childhood Bereavement Network)

Increasingly, UK child bereavement services are being asked to evidence the changes that they bring about for children and young people (Rolls, 2007), yet practitioners and managers say that they lack an appropriate tool that they can use to do this routinely. The use of measures of anxiety and depression to measure change is an indicator of how grief is often pathologised (Currier et al 2007). It could account for the relatively disappointing results of studies which use such tools to measure change in children who were not showing high levels of mental health problems, but nevertheless may have benefited from services in other ways (Stokes 1997; Christ 2005; Currier et al 2007; Rosner 2010).

The development of clinically appropriate tools for measuring outcomes that are directly related to child bereavement service aims has been consistently identified as one of the most important tasks for the field (Stokes, 1997; Christ 2005; Rolls 2007; Rosner 2010). Rolls recommended services work together to identify core clinical outcomes of service provision as the first step to identifying or developing an appropriate tool (2007).

This presentation will report findings from focus groups with key stakeholders (Smith and Cantley 1985) in child bereavement services

(children, parents, practitioners, managers, funders, referrers and academics), exploring the changes they wanted service to help bring about. It will also describe children, parents and practitioners' feedback on draft tools to measure these changes.

16.00-16.30 Discussion and Close (followed by an informal get-together)

Fees are £25 for Postgraduates, £35 BSA members, £40 for non-members. Registrations after 25th October incur a £5 late booking fee.

Registration: <http://portal.britsoc.co.uk/public/event/eventBooking.aspx?id=EVT10283>

Venue Details:

http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/25083/BSA_Imperial_Wharf_directions041209.pdf

DDB Study Group Page: <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/study-groups/social-aspects-of-death,-dying-and-bereavement.aspx>

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