2013

The Stories Students Tell: TAT Stories of Bereaved and Non-bereaved College Students in a Christian Evangelical University

Andrea C. Walker

David E. Balk
City University of New York

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/cose_pub

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Science and Engineering at Digital Showcase. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Science and Engineering Faculty Research and Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Showcase. For more information, please contact mroberts@oru.edu.
The Stories Students Tell: TAT Stories of Bereaved and Non-bereaved College Students in a Christian Evangelical University

Andrea C Walker, Ph.D.
David E. Balk, Ph.D., City University of New York

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/andrea-walker/1/
The researchers analyzed, within an Evangelical Christian university context, bereaved and non-bereaved college students' Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) stories for themes of death, grief, general coping, and religious coping. The study measured: (a) how students in the throes of their grief construct TAT stories, (b) differences in coping between bereaved vs. non-bereaved and women vs. men, and (c) coping for those who specifically mentioned death or grief themes. Results found that students constructed their TAT stories with high frequencies of general coping. Frequencies did not differ by bereavement status or gender, but those mentioning death or grief even more often mentioned coping. Religious coping themes emerged infrequently. Results differ greatly from a prior study at a secular university, suggesting the need to further examine this group. Findings are discussed in light of socio-historical context and recent studies measuring college student religiosity/spirituality. Implications for further research are made.

This manuscript is part of a larger study examining the incidence and prevalence of bereavement in the lives of college students. It builds on an earlier study (Balk et al., 1998) that examined TAT stories written by bereaved and non-bereaved college students through replication and expansion to consider specifically a Christian university population. The assumptions we used in this current research included the following: (a) bereavement is a life crisis, (b) cognitive models of coping provide persuasive explanations of life crises, and (c) some aspects of life crises are ineffable and require free response data gathering techniques.1

1In earlier days the authors used the term "projective" in this context. There is preference in contemporary circles for terms other than "projective," which is deemed old fashioned and misleading and tied to psychoanalytic hypotheses long overturned in the clinical literature. Other terms suggested include "free response," "implicit," "thought sampling," and "constructive." We have used the term "free response" throughout this manuscript. See Meyer & Kurz, 2006 and Smith, 1992a.
We seek to explore these explanations as they occur within an explicitly Christian Evangelical context.

Sociohistorical Context of Bereavement

College students of today face a specific context that provides a new trend in the experience of bereavement, crisis, and loss. Technological advances have led to an environment where students are “connected” to the Internet and forms of social media nearly all the time. Access to information and news reports is ongoing, and students are more aware than ever of global and local violence in the form of terrorist attacks, school shootings, and bullying. This ongoing exposure can create an illusion of proximity, which has been found to relate to distress, post-traumatic stress, and depression for students exposed to school shootings and terrorist attacks (Blanchard, Rowell, Kuhn, Rogers, & Wittrock, 2005; Suomalainen, Haravuori, Berg, Kiviruusu, & Marttunen, 2011). Most depressive symptoms subside after 11 weeks following exposure to violent events (Lindsey, Fugure, & Chan, 2007), however, students dealing with stress and emotional turmoil following the September 11 terrorist attacks even experienced post-traumatic grief after a period of time (Ai, Tice, Lemieux, & Huang, 2011). College students thus seem to be adjusting to the changing environmental demands, even growing personally and spiritually; nevertheless, the experience of loss coping may have shifted due to the perception that crises is not too far off.

Bereavement: A Life Crisis

Bereavement over someone’s death is the paradigmatic human crisis. Contemporary scholars into life crises take their lead from the influential work of Lindemann and his colleagues into acute grief (Lindemann, 1944). Lindemann was instrumental in the development of what came to be known as crisis intervention, and much of his inspiration into offering mental health crisis services came from his work with people who were bereaved (see also Caplan, 1964; Leighton, 1959). Bereavement manifests the essential elements of a crisis. A situation threatens well-being, typical coping skills prove inadequate to resolve the matter, and failure to cope well foreshadows serious repercussions (Moos & Schaefer, 1986). Another constituent aspect of life crises is that they contain within themselves the possibilities of growth and transformation, as some college students experienced after 9/11 (Ai et al., 2011). Some attention has been paid to various trajectories following the crisis of bereavement, including resiliency, recovery, chronic difficulty, and unexpected growth and transformation (Bonanno, Boerner, & Wortman, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008; Worden, 1996). There is growing interest in the prevalence of complicated or traumatic grief reactions, to the extent that a widespread debate persists about whether complicated/prolonged grief is pathological. The recently published DSM-5 opted against the stand of prolonged grief as a disorder but instead identified Persistent Complex Bereavement-Related Disorder (PCBRD) as noted under a new category—“Other Specified Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders” (APA, 2013). This shifts clinical focus onto grief as a distinct inclusion while taking a more general approach than what might be taken within the construct of prolonged grief (Boelen & Prigerson, 2012). Nevertheless, one of the most psychometrically sound measures of problematic grief to date appears to be the Prolonged Grief Disorder Checklist, and prolonged grief has been measured in recent populations (Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Chiambretto, Moroni, Guarniero, Bertolotti, & Prigerson, 2010; Prigerson et al., 1999; Prigerson, Vanderwerker, & Maciejewski, 2008).

Cognitive Models of Coping with Life Crises

Influential models of human development, particularly Erikson’s (1963,1968) psychosocial model, anchor growth and transformation to fundamental life crises: two examples in Erikson’s model include (a) the challenge facing infants whether to trust the people in their world and (b) the challenge facing adolescents whether to form a coherent or diffuse self-identity. Sometimes missed in Erikson’s subtle developmental model is that growth and transformation are not guaranteed, and that unresolved problems mastering any of the life crises that demarcate human existence have enduring effects on human development.

The cognitive revolution that has overtaken psychology (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956; Folkman, 1991; Janis & Mann, 1977) dominates thinking about life crises and coping (Bandura, 1977; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Roesch, Weiner, & Vaughn, 2002). The model for coping with life crises that Moos and Schaefer (1986) have constructed exemplifies this cognitive dominance. In short, effective coping starts with appraisal of a situation and appraisal of one’s options. There are adaptive tasks to accomplish and coping skills whereby one accomplishes the tasks. For instance, in the Moos and Schaefer model successful coping with a life crisis involves (a) establishing the meaning and understanding the personal significance of the event, (b) responding to the situational demands, (c) sustain-
ing interpersonal relationships, (d) preserving an acceptable self-image and believing in one's self-efficacy, and (e) maintaining emotional balance. The coping skills a person uses to attain these adaptive tasks include appraisal-focused coping (such as logical analysis and mental preparation); problem-focused coping (such as seeking information and support); and emotion-focused coping (such as expression of emotion and acceptance of the situation). Whether directly expressed or not, these tasks may permeate bereaved individuals' overall life experiences and be reflected in their interactions with environmental stimuli.

The Place of the Ineffable in Bereavement

Reactions to life crises (specifically bereavement as well as other life crises such as the ones named above) confront individuals with reactions whose emotional intensity and long duration prove surprising and are underappreciated by unaffected outsiders (cf. Silver & Wortman, 1980). Another characteristic of reactions to life crises is their ineffability; people do not always know the words to tell what they are experiencing. Thus, in addition to cognitive, conscious aspects that are important in coping with and understanding responses to life crises, there are phenomena that defy conscious expression and require methods for unearthing what otherwise remains unexpressed.

Use of free response techniques provides a method to unearth the ineffable. The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), one of these free response techniques, involves showing somewhat ambiguous pictures and asking research participants (or clients in therapy) to write stories about the pictures (Murray, 1943). Emotional intensity characterizes many individuals' experiences with bereavement, and TAT pictures reliably elicit emotional responses in participants (Alvarado, 1994). Empirical evidence confirms that implicit, TAT-based measures capture unique aspects of personality and behavior that are not assessed in explicit, questionnaire-based measures (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2001). Recent endorsement of the TAT for research purposes (Jenkins, 2008) has accompanied suggestions for use within socio-emotional (Chapman, 2008b), psychodynamic (Ornduff, 2008), and cognitive frameworks (Chapman, 2008a; Leeper, Dobbs, & Jenkins, 2008; Ronan, Gibbs, Dreer, & Lombardo, 2008). Holt (2008) and Smith (1992b) reviewed the use of TAT to study motives.

Application of Classical test theory and/or coefficient alpha to the TAT are incompatible measures of reliability because of the divergent themes elicited from the different cards (Ackerman, Fowler, & Cle-
and only very recently has bereavement in a Christian university climate been considered (Walker, Hathcoat, & Noppe, 2011/2012; Walker, Gewecke, Noppe, & Fox, in press). A two-year NIMH-funded longitudinal study examined the efficacy of a social support intervention with bereaved college students at a secular university (Balk, Tyson-Rawson, & Colletti-Wetzel, 1993), and TAT data were gathered and analyzed using Moos and Schaefer's (1986) themes of successful coping. Bereaved were significantly more likely than non-bereaved students to project themes of death and grief into their stories, and non-bereaved were more likely to project the coping theme of self-efficacy; none of the other coping themes were significant. This study did not consider grief coping in a Christian university context.

Rationale for the Study
Very recent research measuring bereavement in college settings has not utilized the TAT, which has been suggested in past studies to be effective in measuring bereavement coping (Balk et al., 1998). Also, recent research suggests that Christian universities may provide qualitatively different climates and experiences (Bryant, 2009; Walker et al., 2011/2012; Walker et al., in press). Thus, the purpose of the current study is to: (a) contribute to the growing empirical knowledge base regarding college student bereavement; (b) given shifting socio-historical context, replicate and expand an earlier study utilizing TAT to measure coping in bereaved and non-bereaved students; (c) explore the nature and implications of coping with bereavement specifically for college students in a Christian Evangelical university environment. The study's primary research questions are as follows: (a) how do grieving students narrate stories in response to viewing TAT pictures; (b) how do TAT stories differ in coping themes among students who are non-bereaved, who are within 12 months of a loss, between 12 and 24 months since a loss, and between males and females; and (c) when death and grief themes emerge in TAT stories, how often do students simultaneously mention coping skills?

Method
The study formed part of a larger research effort using a stratified random sample to determine the incidence and prevalence of bereavement in 18–23 year old college students (Balk et al., 2010). The study was first attempted at City University of New York at Brooklyn College, but due to a low response rate, data collection was moved to a private, Christian university in the Midwestern United States, at which most students live on campus. The original intention was to replicate and expand upon the prior study, but surprising results suggest that a Christian Evangelical environment may particularly influence bereavement-related variables.

Participants
The sample, obtained from an Evangelical Christian university, consisted of 117 bereaved and non-bereaved undergraduate students, ages 18 to 23, 64% of whom were female, with a response rate of about 27%. The sample consisted of 69% White, Non-Hispanic, 12% African American, 3% American Indian, 3% Asian American, 4% Puerto-Rican/Hispanic, and 9% from several other racial/ethnic identities. Students were quite homogenous regarding religious preference, as 111 (94%) indicated a preference of Protestantism, 1 of Orthodox Catholicism, 1 of Roman Catholicism, and 5 indicated no preference. Thirty-four (30%) of the participants were bereaved within the preceding 12 months, and 11 (9%) were bereaved between 12 and 24 months. A total of 45 (39%) of the sample experienced a loss within 24 months.

Procedures
After obtaining IRB approval for the study, the researchers obtained a list of currently enrolled students from the university registrar. Using a table of random numbers, students were selected randomly, stratified by classification. Selected students were notified both by telephone and email about the study, and their participation was requested. Those who agreed to participate set up a time with the researcher to answer several questionnaires. Those who did not respond were sent two follow up emails. No subsequent attempts were made. After participating, students were given gift cards to Barnes and Noble for $22.50 as compensation for their time. The data were collected between September 11, 2007, and April 22, 2008.

Students answered a set of questionnaires, including current GPA, Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II), SCL-90-R for distress—using the anxiety sub-scale, General Health Inventory, Impact of Event Scale-Rev (IES-R), and Sleep Questionnaire for insomnia, taking 35 minutes to 1.75 hours to complete; if participants were bereaved, they were asked to complete the PGD Checklist (PG-13; Prigerson et al., 2008) to measure severity of grief. For bereaved students, frequency of general coping themes in the TAT stories related to IES-R Avoidance subscale ($r = .28, p = .06$, two-tailed), a meaningful relationship that we return to later, and to
GPA \((r = .2, p = .03)\). BDI-II and SCL-90-R depression subscale both related to death/grief themes in TAT stories \((r = .36, r = .04, \text{two-tailed}, \text{and } r = .41, p = .02, \text{two-tailed, respectively})\). Results from the administration of these standardized instruments are not our focus here, but it is important to the results of the current study to note that only 2 participants (6% of the participants who had experienced a death loss within 12 months) were measured as having prolonged grief, according to the PG-13, a finding we also return to later.

Essential to the current study are the stories provided by participants. Students were presented with TAT cards 3BM and 10. The second author’s research (Balk et al., 1998) and clinical experience indicated that these cards are appropriate for the purposes of studying college students’ responses to death, grief, and coping. Descriptions from the TAT manuals are as follows: (a) Card 3BM—“On the floor against a couch is the huddled form of a boy with his head bowed on his right arm. Beside him on the floor is a revolver,” and (b) Card 10—“A young woman’s head against a man’s shoulder” (Murray, 1943, p. 19). With both of the cards, students were provided blank paper and given the following instructions:

Write a 200–250 word story about the picture. In your story cover four topics: (a) Describe what you see in the picture; (b) What was going on just before this picture took place? (c) What are the people in this picture thinking and feeling? and (d) How will things turn out for the people in this picture?

Data Analysis
In order to obtain the targeted sample size, 4 samples \((n_1 = 54, n_2 = 27, n_3 = 14, n_4 = 23)\) were randomly drawn from the sampling frame throughout the data collection period. To ensure that the 4 samples did not differ, chi-square analyses were conducted with all themes in both pictures by sample. No significant differences were found, so participants from all 4 samples were combined and analyzed collectively as one group.

Stage 1. Four undergraduate researchers from Brooklyn College and one outside researcher analyzed students’ responses to both TAT stories according to codes used in the prior study with undergraduate students (Balk et al., 1998). Coders were instructed to look for themes in the stories from both pictures from all three of the following: (a) death, (b) grief, and (c) coping. For instance, by grief we meant any reference to responses to being bereaved over a death, and by coping we meant any mention by the writer of steps taken to address a problem, as well as steps taken to avoid a problem. Whether coping imagery emerged, coders were instructed to look for the presence of any of the five adaptive tasks identified by Moos and Schaefer (1986). These tasks include: (a) establishing the meaning of the event, (b) confronting reality and situational demands, (c) sustaining personal relationships, (d) preserving emotional balance, and (e) preserving self-image. Students were allowed to assign more than one code to each story. Inter-rater reliability among the four students at Brooklyn College was 78–80%, which is considered “good agreement” by some measures (Miles & Banyard, 2007, p. 288).

Stage 2. Because of unexpected lack of differences in themes between bereaved and non-bereaved students from the Stage 1 analysis, an additional, unplanned analysis was conducted. Four undergraduate researchers at the private, Christian university then analyzed students’ responses to both TAT stories according to religious codes. Religious codes were based on factors that emerged in a factor analysis of a 29-item instrument, the Religious Coping Activities Scale (RCAS; Pargament et al., 1990), measuring the uses of religion in coping from 586 members of 10 Midwestern churches. Five factors emerged, and a sixth was added by Pargament because of theoretical importance. The factors included: (a) spiritually based coping (trusting that God would not let anything terrible happen to me), (b) good deeds (participated in church services and trying to lead a better life), (c) discontent (felt angry with or distant from God), (d) religious support (received support from clergy and members of the church), (e) plead (asked for a miracle), and (f) religious avoidance (prayed or read the Bible to take one’s mind off the problem) (Hall, 1997, p. 38). Undergraduate researchers analyzed TAT stories for both cards to measure the presence of each of these six themes. Students were allowed to assign more than one code to each story. Inter-rater reliability among the four students at the Christian university was 89%.

Results
TAT Story Content Analysis
To demonstrate how students in the throes of their grief narrate their stories, we present stories in response to Card 3BM from bereaved students with and with-

---

2The coding instructions used to train coders and codebooks are available from the second author.
out prolonged grief. The first student was a 20-year-old African American woman, first-year undergraduate, Protestant Christian. She was measured as having prolonged grief and experienced compounded losses, first of a mentally retarded and ill uncle for whom she was caretaker, and second of her best friend to murder. Both deaths occurred within 2 months of data collection.

In this picture I see a boy on the floor slouched over a bed or chair. He seems to be sleeping, still having on day clothes (no PJ’s). He seems worn out. Before this picture took place, he was probably at school trying to do his best, but he’s so tired and stressed out because he’s failing his own expectations. He comes home, not wanting to converse or be seen and heads to his room. Too exhausted to do anymore he lays on the floor, buries his head in the bed and cries himself to sleep. When you’re asleep you can’t feel the pain of life. He’s stressed, tired, lonely. He wants to do better but he doesn’t have the energy. Too many things in life to do. Hopefully he’ll get better. Learn to manage his time, complete tasks, and not be too hard on himself when he has not done as well as he thought he would. He will hopefully find a balance.

Death and grief themes were not mentioned, but coping emerged in the form of confronting reality and situational demands, preserving emotional balance, and preserving self-image. Religious coping was not mentioned.

The second student was a 20-year-old White American woman, protestant Christian, who experienced the death of her father 6 months earlier. Though several other losses had preceded that event, she did not classify as having prolonged grief.

I see a girl who is depressed. I believe that she was having a stressful day and with the events that have happened in the past couple of months she is overwhelmed and needs to get away from it all. I believe that she is thinking about the event that has caused her to be stressed as well as events that have caused a major change in her life. She reminds me of my reaction to stressful events and the death of my father. When this happens I feel like I need to get alone and be away with my thoughts. I do believe that everything will turn out ok for her and for me. She can survive this event even if she thinks she can’t.

Both death and grief themes emerged, as well as sustaining personal relationships (in this case, with herself) and preserving emotional balance. Again, religious coping was not mentioned.

In sum, both of these students’ stories yield themes of coping. Both suggested positive outcomes, in the form of hopefulness of the first student and strong self-appraisal/self-efficacy of the second. Even with varied tones to the stories and presumably different experiences of grief-related stress, these students seemed to reside within a common thread of a restoration-orientation. The common focus here appears to be on “getting through.”

Differences in Death, Grief, and Coping by Bereavement Status and Gender

Stage 1. Several chi-square tests for independence were conducted with all participant data to measure possible significant differences. These analyses include the over-arching codes, death theme (yes vs. no), grief theme (yes vs. no), and coping theme (yes vs. no). All three of these codes were analyzed using chi-squares with presence or absence of the following variables: (a) bereavement status of no loss, loss within 12 months, and loss between 12 and 24 months (2 X 3), and (b) gender (2 X 2). A total of 6 chi-squares were conducted for both pictures, all of which adhered to Cronk’s (2010) requirements that expected frequencies should never be lower than 1 and no more than 20% lower than 5. None of the analyses yielded significant results. We had planned to conduct subsequent analyses using the five tasks if the coping theme was found to vary, but these were unnecessary. Because the prior study (Balk et al., 1998) found significant differences in both death and grief themes, with bereaved college students mentioning these themes more frequently than non-bereaved, and found non-bereaved students used much more frequently than bereaved students the theme of preserving self-image, the lack of any significant differences in students’ responses in the current study is puzzling. We then decided to explore whether the religious nature of the university had influenced coping.

Stage 2. The emergence of religious themes in the 234 stories analyzed was surprisingly infrequent. Chi-squares were conducted comparing the presence (yes or no) of the 6 religious coping themes by: (a) bereavement status of no loss, loss within 12 months, and loss between 12 and 24 months (2 X 3), and (b) gender (2 X 2)—totaling 12 for both pictures. We were unable to interpret most of the analyses due to low cell size. Expected frequencies for each category should be at least 1, and no more than 20% of the categories should have expected frequencies of less than 5 (Cronk, 2010). In some cases, such as in Card 10, no participants
identified the theme of religious support. Responses were then collapsed into one category including all participants who had experienced a loss within 24 months, but several of these remained un-interpretable. For the analyses that had large enough cell sizes to be interpreted, no significant results were found.

Frequencies of Death, Grief, and Coping Themes

The perplexing nature of these results led to further scrutiny, and an examination of theme frequencies provides some insight into the findings. For Card 3BM, death themes were mentioned 44% of the time, grief themes 30% of the time, and general coping themes 85% of the time; on the other hand, spiritually based coping was mentioned 14% of the time, good deeds 2%, discontent with God 4%, religious support 3%, spiritually pleading 7%, and religious avoidance 9% of the time. For Card 10, death themes were mentioned 32% of the time, grief themes 25% of the time, and coping themes 68% of the time; moreover, spiritually based coping was mentioned 16% of the time, good deeds 1%, discontent with God 5%, religious support 0%, spiritually pleading 4%, and religious avoidance 2% of the time (see Table 1). As a whole, this sample rarely mentioned the religious coping themes in TAT stories, a surprising finding in a sample from a Christian university. Moos and Schaeffer's (1986) tasks of coping, however, were much more frequently mentioned than other themes (see Figure 1), though seemingly not influenced by gender or bereavement status. Stories about Card 3BM showed a particularly high tendency for students to rely on four of the five adaptive tasks (Moos & Schaeffer, 1986); these tasks include establishing the meaning of the event, sustaining personal relationships, preserving emotional balance, and preserving self-image (see Figure 2).

Death or Grief and Coping Themes

Our next research question involves how well students cope when death and grief themes were men-

| TABLE 1 |
| Frequencies of Themes for Cards 3BM and 10 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Card 3BM</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Ber 0-12</td>
<td>Ber 12-24</td>
<td>Not Be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 42)</td>
<td>(n = 75)</td>
<td>(n = 34)</td>
<td>(n = 11)</td>
<td>(n = 72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritually Based Coping</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good deeds</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontent with God</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Pleading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Avoidance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Card 10</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Ber 0-12</td>
<td>Ber 12-24</td>
<td>Not Be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 42)</td>
<td>(n = 75)</td>
<td>(n = 34)</td>
<td>(n = 11)</td>
<td>(n = 72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritually Based Coping</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good deeds</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontent with God</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Pleading</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Avoidance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mentioned in their stories. In other words, for those who reflect rumination on unpleasant aspects of loss, and who may thus be at higher risk for negative grief outcomes, we are most interested in coping skills or the perceived ability to cope as reflected in projected stories. To address this topic, we sectioned out all participants who mentioned death and grief themes and examined the frequency of Moos and Schaefer’s (1986) coping themes by gender and bereavement status. We compared these results to the frequency with which coping themes were mentioned in the entire sample, regardless of whether death or grief themes emerged in their stories (see Table 2). For Card 3BM, we see a few changes in frequency of at least 10%; namely, a higher percentage of women mentioned coping themes when they also mentioned death or grief. Also, those who were
TABLE 2

Frequencies of Moos and Schaefer's (1986) Tasks of Coping Themes for Cards 3BM and 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Card 3BM Total</th>
<th>Card 3BM Death and Grief Themes Only</th>
<th>Card 10 Total</th>
<th>Card 10 Death and Grief Themes Only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men (n = 42)</td>
<td>Women (n = 75)</td>
<td>Ber 0–12 (n = 34)</td>
<td>Ber 12–24 (n = 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>26 (62%)</td>
<td>46 (61%)</td>
<td>21 (62%)</td>
<td>7 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>29 (69%)</td>
<td>53 (71%)</td>
<td>23 (68%)</td>
<td>5 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>16 (38%)</td>
<td>29 (39%)</td>
<td>15 (44%)</td>
<td>4 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>24 (57%)</td>
<td>54 (72%)</td>
<td>24 (71%)</td>
<td>5 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Image</td>
<td>35 (83%)</td>
<td>53 (71%)</td>
<td>26 (77%)</td>
<td>9 (82%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

not bereaved and had death or grief themes in their stories mentioned establishing meaning, confronting reality, and preserving self-image more frequently, consistent with Balk et al. (1998); those who were bereaved mentioned preserving emotional balance and self-image more frequently. For Card 10, we see sizeable increases in frequencies across the board, whether bereaved or not bereaved and in both women and men. This result could suggest that the picture of Card 10 happens to trigger more coping themes. As a whole, however, this group reflects a perceived ability to cope effectively in their stories, even when focused on more negative aspects of loss such as death and grief.

Discussion

Results here paint a very different picture of coping for students at a Christian Evangelical university than what was found previously at a secular university (Balk
et. al., 1998), though it is inappropriate to conclude actual differences until a direct comparison can be made. To summarize, content analysis of stories revealed themes of coping, even for those struggling the most with their grief. For both cards, coping emerged much more frequently than did death or grief and did so regardless of bereavement status and gender; when death or grief emerged in the stories, coping emerged even more. Coping themes for bereaved students related to IES-R avoidance, nearly reaching significance (r = .28, p = .06). Only 6% of bereaved students were measured to have prolonged grief (Balk et al., 2010), whereas 12–21% were in other recent studies (Chiambretto et al., 2010; Goldsmith, Morrison, Vanderwerker, & Prigerson, 2008). Collectively, these results indicate that this group as a whole presents optimistic stories. When bereaved, stories suggest that they are coping well, but students may actually be having different internal experiences. Results alert us to the possibility that these students approach bereavement very differently from others and highlight the need for further exploration involving direct empirical comparison.

These results should first be considered in light of the structural and temporal positioning of the previous study at the secular university. Balk et al. (1998) utilized a slightly larger sample size, a larger portion of which was bereaved, and collected data at 2 points in time; these additional factors could have increased the study’s ability to detect group differences. Also, with the passage of nearly 15 years since that study was conducted, and the increased social connectedness and media attention regarding terrorist attacks, school shootings, and bullying violence, the general experience and expression of loss coping may have contextually shifted. For instance, students may have learned ways of filtering the traumatic and gruesome images constantly bombarding them through their smart phones and other media devices. Continual, habitual interaction through social media websites may also contribute to a leaning toward presenting themselves in a socially desirable way. These changes potentially contribute to development of a “distancing” tendency, learned for the purpose of providing a needed emotional buffer from close media exposure to others. The changing social context may, in turn, influence how students presented themselves in their TAT stories. Full exploration is outside our scope here and must also be pursued in future research.

We think our results cannot be entirely explained by socio-historical context and that the distinct Christian Evangelical environment of our sample had a greater influence than anticipated. We direct the remainder of our discussion toward considering the implications of recent research measuring religiosity/spirituality (R/S) in college students, focusing on two major areas: (a) the importance of spiritual struggle in the individual college student’s experience, and (b) the contextual environment in which college students facing these struggles are nested.

Literature regarding this first implication is conflicted. Quantitative research utilizing a moderate to large sample size has found strong positive correlations between spiritual struggle and post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression for college students dealing with loss, particularly for Catholic students (Wortmann, Park, & Edmondson, 2012). Phenomenological research utilizing in-depth interviews of students, however, revealed rich, contextual layers contributing to greater complexity in the experience of spiritual struggle. These students’ final appraisals of their spiritual struggles suggested positive outcomes in their own understandings of themselves as congruent wholes, in their relationships with others, and in the meaning of their lived realities as a result of the struggles (Rockeyback, Walker, & Luzader, 2012). Furthermore, spiritual struggle appears to contribute to self-authorship, which may be a crucial component in the spiritual growth of college student (Bryant, 2011a).

The impact of contextual environment has been recently supported in both bereavement and R/S literature. Institutional type (regional, comprehensive, teaching focused vs. Research I) appears to relate to some experiences of college students (Cupit et al., 2013). Campus context also influences development of an ecumenical worldview, a component of spiritual development (Bryant, 2011b). Specifically, students who experience religion, spirituality, and diversity in their classrooms also experience more spiritual struggles, and this results in development of ecumenical worldview.

These studies suggest that spiritual struggles, whether individual or within a greater environment, can result in college students’ spiritual growth. What
does this say about our students' frequent reflections of secular coping themes in the absence of religious coping themes that included spiritual struggle? We propose that students may (a) indeed, be coping well during the experience of death loss, (b) not be coping well but presenting an image of “overcoming” during adversity, or (c) coping well in terms of resilience but, in the absence of spiritual struggle, not necessarily benefiting from spiritual and personal growth following the loss.

The first possibility is supported by research findings that those with higher levels of R/S have been found to have higher adaptive or problem-focused coping styles (Kragleloh, Chai, Shepherd, & Billington, 2012). That R/S coping themes were rarely mentioned may not indicate the absence of R/S influence on these students. Park, Edmondson, and Mills (2010) discussed how R/S may be central to meaning making during the appraisal process of stressful life events such as death losses. R/S may not separate itself into distinct components as measured here per say, but it may be so pervasive that it contributes to overall coping. It is possible that those mechanisms absorb the upheaval accompanying stressful events so well that we see few real changes after such an event; this may explain the absence of differences in coping between bereaved and non-bereaved students and high coping for all.

The second possibility may reflect the overall influence of this particular campus's culture, which emphasizes spiritual empowerment and healing. The focus on overcoming adversity shifts the cultural milieu heavily toward restoration orientation and away from dealing with the difficult, emotional aspects of loss orientation, as described in the dual-process model for coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). To embrace the gamut of emotions and thoughts in response to a significant loss within a R/S environment, one might experience dissonance with God (Pargament et al., 1990) and/or spiritual struggle, both likely components of loss-orientation. Without perceiving having the freedom to oscillate between loss and restoration directly, students may develop a subversive need to present themselves in a restoration-oriented way. The meaningful relationship between coping themes and scores on the IES-R Avoidance subscale for bereaved students suggests just this. Prior evidence using different participants from this same institution also supports the notion (Walker et al., in press). Rockenbach et al. (2012) discusses the importance of normalizing the experience of spiritual struggle to reduce the fear of ostracism when sharing these very personal narratives.

We build upon this point to discuss the third possibility, endorsing it as the most likely contribution to the unexpected results. Students may be gleaning the important mechanisms from their R/S that help them to quickly return to homeostasis following loss but doing so at the expense of engaging in the spiritual struggles that may result from orienting themselves toward the loss. A college context open to students' spiritual expressions, which is characteristic of this campus, appears to diminish spiritual struggling (Bryant, 2011b). Recall that the absence of spiritual struggle relates to better outcomes in some cases (Wortmann et al., 2012), which may explain high coping themes and prolonged grief in this group, but it may not lead to self-authorship, a crucial component to spiritual growth (Bryant, 2011a). Warm environments that are not limited to spiritual expression but encourage other forms of direct expression foster spiritual growth through development of ecumenical worldview (Bryant, 2011b).

Research not considering R/S suggests similar implications for the idea of struggle in traumatic grief situations. Adults interviewed 6 weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks, for instance, perceived more personal growth as they experienced greater distress; post traumatic growth reflected both positive functioning and continued distress (Park, Riley, & Snyder, 2012). Moreover, the UCLA spirituality study measured a consistent positive association between spirituality and mental health issues, but R/S also emerged as an important component to coping. In other words, those who had more mental health struggles were drawn more to R/S, and their ability to cope with those struggles was thus higher than non-religious students (Research Institute, 2011). Only 15% of the sample was from Christian Evangelical schools. Other research has suggested unique experiences within Evangelical schools (Bryant, 2009; Walker et al., in press; Walker et al., 2011/2012) and the importance of studying R/S in a Christian college (Toussaint, 2012).

These results shed light on an important issue that is gaining attention in literature, influence of R/S on adaptive coping with bereavement of college students specifically in a Christian university context. The present study offers the following to literature: (a) sheds light on possible differences in coping of religious and non-religious students, particularly when considering an Evangelical Christian campus context, (b) provides hints to the effect of spiritual struggle on meaning that college students make in light of a death loss, and (c) reveals the possible influence of socio-historical context, characterized by increased interconnectedness and awareness of trauma and terrorism, on our students' experiences of bereavement and R/S. To our knowledge,
no other study has considered free responses in the context of bereavement and loss with students at a Christian Evangelical university.

This study makes a small first step in uncovering coping mechanisms of grief of students in a Christian university context. Rather than distinct findings, our results point to the importance of several more lines of inquiry involving measures of R/S and loss coping, comparing across Christian and secular campus contexts, further exploration of spiritual struggle and its role in loss coping and R/S development for Christian Evangelical students, and the influence of socio-historical context on college students' general experiences of loss, coping, and R/S. Further exploration may expand upon free-response techniques, utilized in the TAT, incorporating interview data as efforts in meaning making involved in appraising the loss become more cognitively formed (and responses become more effable), and including quantitative measures of secular and religious coping.

We would be remiss if we did not point out that, though prior research suggests otherwise (Balk et al., 1998), the lack of differences found here might reflect shortcomings of the TAT in capturing coping in the grief-related pictures used. There have been conflicting findings about using free response techniques, utilized in the TAT, in incorporating interview data as efforts in meaning making involved in appraising the loss become more cognitively formed (and responses become more effable), and including quantitative measures of secular and religious coping.

In retrospect, this study clearly would have benefited from a direct measure of religiosity, as well as a more diverse sample in geographic location and university context (including secular, Christian, and other religious contexts), but in its design, we did not consider an institutional context of religiosity as a major contributor to students' individual grief experiences. The pursuit of knowledge led us to unexpected findings that required our consideration of some variables for which we did not account. In addition, participants were not asked about closeness to their deceased loved one, which may help explain the lack of significant differences. Finally, students wrote their own stories; follow up questions about the stories could not be asked, and handwriting was often difficult to read.

References


views and stressful encounters: Reciprocal influence from a mean-


Servaty-Seib, H. L., & Taub, D. J. (Eds.), (2008), Assisting bereaved college students. New Directions for Student Services 121.


**Author Information**

WALKER, ANDREA C. Ph.D. Address: Oral Roberts University, Behavioral Sciences Department. Email: awalker@oru.edu. Title: Professor, Psychology. Degrees: PhD (Human Development and Family Studies) Oklahoma State University; MS (Management) Southern Nazarene University; BS (Psychology) Oral Roberts University.

BALK, DAVID E. Ph.D. Address: Brooklyn College at CUNY, Department of Health and Nutritional Sciences. Email: Dbalk@brooklyn.cuny.edu. Title: Professor, Chair, and Director, Graduate Studies in Thanatology. Degrees: PhD (Counseling Psychology) University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; MC (Counselor Education) Arizona State University; MA (Theology) Marquette University; BA (Philosophy) Immaculate Conception College.