

'Resilient when it comes to death': Exploring the significance of bereavement for the well – being of social work students.

Introduction

The mental health of students has become a topic of great contemporary concern in the UK (Richardson, 2019; Thorley, C, 2017; Universities UK, 2018). There has been a steady increase in student suicides, with a recent study showing that the current generation of young people experience the lowest measures of happiness and positive well-being since reporting began (Universities UK, 2018). Despite this, data from 110 UK Universities, collected via Freedom of Information legislation, demonstrated that many Higher Education institutions still do not monitor waiting lists, or overall expenditure for student mental health support services (Richardson, 2019). In 2018, as a response to these factors, the UK Office for Students launched a challenge aimed at encouraging Universities to take substantive action to improve their mental health support for students (OFs, 2018).

In the USA Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2013), bereavement is included as a mental health issue alongside depression and anxiety disorders. Whilst this is not the case in UK, bereavement is, however, recognised as a factor in common mental health conditions, including anxiety, low mood, depression, and panic disorders (NHS, 2020). Taking this as context, this article describes a small, collaborative pilot study carried out at two UK Higher Education institutions, one in London and the other in West Sussex, which sought to explore the significance of bereavement as a factor in the mental and emotional well – being of social work students.

Within the general student population, social work students face particular challenges which exacerbate the potential pressures on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Social work degrees in the UK are professionally regulated and thereby necessitate balancing complex work placements with academic study, as well as adherence to specialist practice frameworks. Additionally, a considerable percentage of students are drawn to study social work as a response to their own experiences of loss and trauma, which they may unconsciously hope to resolve through working with service users (Kramer, 1998). Collins, Coffey, and Morris (2010) found that significant numbers of social work students suffer from low self-esteem and emotional exhaustion and recommend increased institutional intervention to ameliorate this. Parker (2006) identified a need for social work students to increase their resilience and coping strategies in the face of stressors created by practice, whilst Collins, Coffey and Morris (2010, p.978) suggest that 'it is perhaps hard for a potential helper to admit to a need for help themselves.' However, Kramer (1998) found that without this help, student social workers were poorly prepared to work effectively with the complex bereavement needs of service users. As a part of this preparation, Kramer (1998) recommends that social work students are encouraged and supported to explore losses within their own lives in order that they can effectively support others.

The pilot study reported in this article explored the impacts of bereavement on the personal and professional lives of social work students at pre qualifying levels, as well as considering the support available to them. Additionally, the article emphasizes some specific cultural issues associated with bereavement and loss which the authors recommend are further investigated and effectively integrated into social work education and training in order to equip practitioners with the skills and knowledge needed to work successfully with service users.

Student Experiences of Bereavement

Amongst the general population, research evidence shows that grieving people are at increased risk of suicide, as well as mental and physical health problems (Fulton, 2010). Bereavement has also been highlighted as a specific contributory factor for mental health difficulties amongst adolescents (Stikkelbroek et al, 2015). Research from Universities UK (2018) shows that half of mental health problems are firmly established by age 14; rising to three quarters by age 24, thereby demonstrating the vulnerability of students who span this age range.

Within social work education, aspects of death, loss and change were once core topics, in order that students could be encouraged to process aspects of their own experience, prior to starting their practice (Kramer, 1998; Holloway and Taplin, 2013). However, the shift towards managerialism and preoccupation with risk over preceding decades has gradually eroded this focus on loss, leaving significant gaps in the pre- qualifying education of UK social work students, who may nevertheless face multiple aspects of loss and bereavement within their practice. A literature review carried out prior to commencement of the research study , did not identify any studies exclusively focussed on social work student's experiences of bereavement, although Holloway and Taplin provide a valuable account of contemporary issues around death, dying and social work in their Editorial to a Special Edition of the British Journal of Social Work (2013). In the same Edition, Silverman discusses many important personal lessons learned through her decades of research and practice in the bereavement field, recognising that it is often the bereaved themselves that have the most expertise (Silverman, 2013).

The literature review also found a limited number of articles which discussed student involvement with death and bereavement in varying contexts. Collins et al (2010) and Collins (2006) studied stress and well-being amongst social work students, identifying previous experiences of loss as potential risk factors for mental health problems. The lead author has previously documented her experience of supporting a bereaved social work student, in her first year of study (Turner, 2014b) whilst Fulton (2012) also incorporates personal experience to offer social work students advice on dealing with death and dying during their placements. Amongst other literature focussing on student experiences of bereavement, Vejar (2013) provides an overview of the different deaths which students may encounter during their studies, whilst van Breda (2017) cites loss as a significant challenge for first year undergraduates. A larger number of studies also evaluate the impact of death education on students (McClatchey and King, 2016; Cagle and Kovacs, 2009; McClatchey and King, 2015; Chan et al, 2017; McIlwaine et al, 2007; Kramer, 1998;), whilst other studies focus on the attitude of health and social care students towards death and dying (Yang, 2012). Articles also offered insights into the death of faculty members (Sanford, 2017); the growing problem of suicide amongst students (Stanley et al, 2010) and the importance of cultural awareness and spirituality within social work education (Stirling et al, 2010).

The recent focus on wellbeing amongst University students has also led to some media reporting of bereavement. In an anonymous student article published in the Guardian (2014) the author describes the death of her father shortly after she had started at University and her accompanying fears of being labelled or stigmatised. This led to deteriorating mental health, made significantly worse by a perceived lack of institutional support. Ackermann (2015) writing in the Guardian reports a similar pattern of depression and panic attacks after the death of her father during her second year at University, which

remained sequestered from academic and other staff, an experience which has been repeatedly underlined by recent reports into student mental health (Richardson, 2019; Thorley, C, 2017; Universities UK ,2018).

Many contemporary grief theorists suggest that resolving bereavement in the long term is dependent on the task of making meaning from the death (Neimeyer, 1999). However, where students feel vulnerable and desperate as Ackermann reports (2015) this may be impossible, without effective and informed support. Additionally, whilst the term ‘bereavement’ is used universally to describe the period of mourning following death, it is not a homogenised experience but one which is mediated through cultural and societal norms, as well as personal experience. Cagle and Kovacs (2009) highlight the culturally diverse and complex aspects of bereavement and indeed the dying process itself, which in the UK tends to be dominated by a western paradigm (Laurie and Neimeyer, 2011). Where the core values of social work include a recognition of diversity and anti-oppressive practice, recent Government measures have recognised that, just as with mental health, Universities need to do more to improve the success rate and experience of ethnic minority University students. (Gov, 2019) This is consistent with articles found within the preliminary literature review. For example, Lawson (2013), in a powerful study of African Canadians bereaved by gun violence, suggests that their grief is generally unrecognised and disenfranchised in a culture which views them largely as social problems. A recurring theme in Lawson’s study, which is underscored by data from the pilot research discussed in this article, concerned ‘the number of times they had been told to ‘get over’ the loss of their loved one’ thereby trivialising the death, or suggesting lack of resilience (Lawson, 2013, p.9).

The literature review did not find any articles which specifically focussed on diversity, culture, and bereavement amongst social work students. However, McClatchey and King (2015) in their study of death anxiety amongst human services students, found that religious belief, which was more prevalent amongst the black and minority ethnic students in this study, acted as a protective factor against anxiety. Conversely, Collins (2006, p. 450) in a study of mental health difficulties amongst social work students, reported that 'black students seem more likely to be drawn into diagnoses of serious mental health difficulties, and to receive less sympathetic treatment than their white counterparts.' Given the correlation between bereavement and the potential onset of mental health issues, the literature review found a significant absence of research focussing on social work students generally and specifically on black and minority ethnic social work student's experiences of bereavement.

Research Design

Findings from the literature review highlight a space for further research which focusses specifically on the diverse bereavement experiences of social work students, and which considers the impacts of bereavement on academic, as well as professional work with service users (McClatchey & King, 2017; Van Breda, 2017).

The study discussed within this article, responds to this gap in the literature by posing the following research questions:

- How does the experience of bereavement during placement or initial social work training impact on social work students?

- What specific information, support and advice do Higher Education Institutions offer to bereaved social work students?
- What are the implications for both social work education and social work educators?

The pilot study adopted a qualitative approach drawn from the Biographic Narrative Interpretive method (Wengraf, 2001). Qualitative methods have a specialist role in their capacity to examine people's routines, habits, social lives, beliefs, and opinions all of which contribute a fuller understanding of societal phenomena. Within this, narrative methodologies attempt to locate the meaning within human experience (Polkinghorne, 1998) and are therefore highly suited to studies involving personal experiences of death and dying. The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was developed by German sociologists researching the testimony of holocaust survivors (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 34). It is a free association narrative method, which allows research participants an uninterrupted narrative flow. Underlying this is the theory that participants will choose whatever is important to them and select the order for this, thereby reducing researcher intervention and helping to diminish bias.

The study was granted ethical approval by the institutional review boards at both Universities. Participants were then accessed via the Social Work departments at the host institutions, which both follow the standard UK social work curriculum, combining work placements with academic study. Participants were recruited from pre- qualifying social work programmes students, in both undergraduate and post graduate programmes.

In order to recruit participants, a description of the research was made available through internal communication networks and students were invited to express an interest via email. They were then supplied with an Information Sheet detailing further information

about the study. This explained that interviews would be audio recorded and held on encrypted memory sticks until they were transcribed and then deleted. Transcriptions would also be made available to participants in order that they could change any details, prior to analysis and any dissemination. Information provided to participants in advance of the study also explained that they would have their names and details altered, as well as retaining the right to withdraw from the study, even after the interview. In recognition of the potentially emotive nature of the study, advice, and guidance on the possible risks of participation and information about institutional counselling support were also made available to participants. The respective University counselling teams were notified that the research was taking place.

Once the information was made available, 11 participants in total volunteered to participate in the study. The 11 consisted of seven students recruited from the London University, and four from the Sussex institution. Students were drawn from both undergraduate and post qualifying programmes. Six of the participants from the London University were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds, whilst all four students from the other institution and one from the London University identified as white British. The sample reflects the fundamentally different student profiles across the host institutions. In London, two thirds of the institution's total student intake come from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, whilst seven in ten students have environments in the top twenty per cent of the official multiple deprivation index (Raftery, 2018). This is in stark comparison to the West Sussex University, where 2018/19 Admissions statistics show that almost 90 % of students are from middle class, white, British backgrounds. Whilst the study did not specifically prioritise either ethnicity, power or economic deprivation within the initial research design, data

collected demonstrates the significance of these factors within the bereavement experiences of students.

Once participants had given informed consent to participate in the study, interviews were arranged in quiet rooms away from the usual areas identified with University teaching or tutorials. The initial interview stage of the research followed BNIM which recommends standardising a 'SQUIN' (Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative) (Wengraf, 2001, p. 111) intended to elicit open narrative, rather than utilising structured or semi-structured questions. This SQUIN was used at the beginning of all research interviews, staying as close as possible to these words on every occasion:

'Please tell me about your experience of bereavement, during your social work training. This should include all the events and experiences that were important to you personally no matter how insignificant they might seem. Begin wherever you like. I'll just listen. I won't interrupt. I might jot down some notes for afterwards.'

Once the interviews were completed, the data was transcribed and analysed by the research team using a thematic analysis technique, which identified and interpreted themes in relation to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After individual data sets had been analysed and interpreted according to theme, the entire data set was then cross referenced for commonalities across the respective institutions.

Themes

Although students expressed themselves in different ways across the data set, due to the relatively small number of interviews involved in this pilot study, the data were divided into four main themes which each responded to the research questions, as follows:

1. Practicalities: '*We cannot buy all the tickets'*

At both Universities, the death of a family member created practical difficulties for all the students who experienced this. These practicalities manifested themselves chiefly as financial concerns. Due to the London University's particular demographic profile, a large proportion of students reported experiencing financial hardship following significant bereavement. In many cases this was exacerbated by the obligation to undertake expensive foreign travel and/or time-consuming breaks from work or study in order to settle the affairs of deceased relatives:

'It was a long process, it was a long grieving process because in African culture, especially Ghanaian culture, the person stays in there for 40 days.'

(Ezra, London)

Whilst it might be expected that these pressures would create obvious emotional wellbeing issues, during the interviews the London University students presented largely as stoic about the financial aspects of their bereavements, framing them in practical rather than emotional terms. Leah, for example, was clear that her relative would have to be put in

cold storage until she had the money to pay for a funeral and she reported this as a practical issue which would need a similarly pragmatic solution:

'I need to get a job as soon as I finish. So, I'm saying if I can get a job and he too [husband] has to get a job, there's two of us looking for full time work so that we can raise money and then one of us can go and one of us can look after the children. This is our plan then because we cannot buy all the tickets, we can't and the bill there is high' (Leah, London)

At the West Sussex University students also experienced practical difficulties, although due to the different demographics, these were not as frequently connected to the necessity for lengthy and expensive journeys:

'Having to sell the house, which has triggered having to rehome the animals, so it's kind of like, it's bam, bam, bam of losses and then it's literally like everything at once.' (Rebecca, West Sussex)

For the predominantly black and minority ethnic participants at the London University, some of the greatest practical pressures following bereavement, were those created by both the professional and institutional regulations. Although there is still much more work to do, recent programmes of widening participation within UK Universities have improved access and opportunity for black and minority ethnic students and many of the study participants at the London University were accordingly the first in their families to study for a degree. Consequently, where bereavement rituals required extensive absence overseas,

students often felt caught in a double bind between accommodating the needs of their families whilst maintaining academic and regulatory requirements:

'A lot of our predecessors are not educated; they never went to College even. They never went to University and they put most of their weight into us you know. There's only a few of us who have made it out of Jamaica, so when something happens, something major, the responsibility to shoulder that falls on me' (Kaarina, London).

Additionally, as discussed in the literature review, some students in London reported feeling that their bereavement experiences were not fully integrated with general social work values and were sometimes underestimated. This was largely attributed to a perceived lack of cultural understanding, contextualised within a dominant western, Christian paradigm of bereavement involving administration, a short funeral and expectation of 'normal' return to work or study:

'So, when I came back after my nephew died, I came back with the death certificate because when I was doing my lectures the teacher kept on saying to me 'you have to bring the death certificate' ... and I remember blocking my ears.

(Zendaya, London)

'A lot of us have our children, or have families, husbands and jobs and all this stuff we're juggling and we are still showing up and trying to do the work ...and not being able to process what we have been through' (Kaarina, London)

2. Support Needs: '*Nobody's really thinking what students are going through*'

There was significant overlap in the interviews, between practicalities and a perceived lack of informed support at both Universities. Participants from both institutions all remarked upon what they perceived as a lack of integrated understanding and support for bereavement across the social work programmes and wider institutions. Most significantly perhaps, students reported what they perceived to be a lack of congruence between social work values and programme content and their experiences of bereavement support.

Debbie, is typical in highlighting counselling which she felt 'didn't link with the social work':

'I came to Uni in 2014 and then my Aunt passed away, she had cancer. And then in 2016 my Dad passed away. All of this as I was trying to go through University. I got some help from the counselling...but I felt that it didn't link in with the social work and nobody's really thinking what students are going through...I'm thinking about myself now, because I've got all these bereavements.' (Debbie, London)

Whilst students recognised that professional and institutional procedures could not be universally altered to accommodate their personal needs, there was a common request for greater understanding, encapsulated by Kaarina:

'I think for University, in terms of helping people like myself who are dealing with grief, it is just to start from the point of view of "How can I help you as an individual?"'
(Kaarina, London)

Students across both institutions also demonstrated considerable personal variation in their support and coping mechanisms. As indicated in the literature review, students in London collectively drew much of their support from faith:

'My religion, my religion has kept me sound through all of this'

(Kaarina, London)

The West Sussex students did not include discussion of spirituality or religion, but reported using drink and other ad hoc support mechanisms to help them cope with their grief following bereavement:

'..drinking to excess ,fairly regularly, because I felt like that was the only time that I allowed myself to talk about it.....I lived on campus in the first year, quite a few of the security guards that talked me down a few times, and sat with me at 3 O'clock in the morning.....'

(Catrina, West Sussex)

Students at both institutions also highlighted the need for social work education to offer greater support and information on complicated bereavements like suicide or murder, which many of them had encountered within their personal or professional lives:

'I was working with a young person who kept threatening to commit suicide...and I wanted to be there for her and she wouldn't talk to anyone else ...and it was emotionally draining but we're taught not to express that, when you go home and you know you're fighting your own battles in your personal life...' (Kaarina, London)

The study also indicated that Practice Educators and those working with students on placement may need training and support in order to be able to cascade this to students. In her interview, Sheila, a London student, described working with a service user who died over a weekend. Sheila was distressed by this and then shocked when her Practice Educator wrote in her report that she needed to be 'more resilient when it comes to death,' leading her to question 'Well do I? Do I?

3. Differing Cultural Practices: '*There's a lot to piece together.*'

Whilst cultural differences were very distinct between the two student populations, they were also inextricably entwined within the four separate themes. In London, issues of culture were apparent in the student's own personal experiences, for example in their obligation to visit other countries to honour their dead. Bereavement experiences amongst the London students also occurred more frequently, partly due to large extended families which increased the likelihood and potential repercussions of a death.

Student social workers in London also described working with bereaved individuals and families from different countries and cultures but without the appropriate knowledge or skills to support them:

'We were doing some work with this man whose father had died. He had come from Sri Lanka, but he wasn't able to bury him because he was homeless, he had no money and all'

his family were in Sri Lanka. So, the borough had to pay for his funeral. In order for them to pay they had to see all his papers and documents and look at his pension and all kinds of things from over in Sri Lanka and this guy can hardly speak any English, He's in his thirties, but he was also drinking a lot... they were Hindu so they wanted a particular funeral...', so we managed to get that and it was fine...' (Sheila, London)

'We're dealing with Bangladeshi mothers and different wives and a whole host of different issues. So, in terms of culture and religion, there's a lot to piece together and sort out...'
(Sheila, London)

At the West Sussex University there was no substantive discussion of culture or ethnicity amongst the student participants. However, students did report on what they described as institutional cultures and the 'culture of placement.' In particular, they felt their Practice Educators placed high importance on 'getting on' with placements, with few allowances made for the emotional impact of a bereavement. However, for other students the opposite was true with the culture reflecting a need to cosset:

".....my practice educator though seemed to become like a bit overprotective of me and a bit nervous around me being there...." which resulted in me trying to reassure her...."
(Lauren, West Sussex)

4. Enduring bereavement: '*All the loss, the pain and the grief*'

Prior to beginning the study, the intention had been to sub divide the bereavement experiences into categories including the deaths of service users, family members and others. However, in practice, the open narrative method and initial SQUIN (Wengraf, 2011) resulted in study participants seamlessly describing a series of deaths and losses which all interconnected:

'Ok – so basically why I showed an interest is because I had a bereavement when I was 14, my brother he was shot in the US because we grew up there.. for myself I feel as though I've had to be strong through all the bereavement stages...' (Debbie, London)

'I had a complicated relationship with my dad ...my mum and dad separated before I was born. My dad remarried and I have two little sisters.'(Bethany, West Sussex)

Adam, a London student also recalled the death of a service user, decades before which was clearly an event which still resonated with him even now:

'And there's the selfish professional worry in that 'is there something that I haven't done?...I never want to have to do that again, go and speak to someone's Mum and say...you know'
(Adam, London)

This drive to make meaning was also reflected in the study, for example by Ezra who had experienced multiple bereavements during his early life:

'I'm hoping to be able to use all my experiences, all the loss, the pain, and the grief in the field of social work to speak to my clients' (Ezra, London)

Discussion

This small, collaborative pilot study aimed at addressing the recent emphasis on student wellbeing in UK Universities, through an exploration of bereavement support amongst social work students at two institutions with radically different demographics. Although, a preliminary literature review did not find any research expressly related to social work student's bereavement experiences, the findings of the study support evidence from previous literature in the field of death and bereavement, as well as responding to the specific research questions.

In considering the first of these research questions, the study found significant differences in the impacts of bereavement across the two institutions. Many of these differences are linked to culture, consistent with Lawson's study of African Canadians, where she positions grief as 'an epistemological site that can illuminate the assumed value of racialised lives within a society' (2013, p.4). Students at the London University, where black and minority ethnic communities had greater representation, reported higher incidence of practical issues associated with the need for long distance travel and the financial implications of this. Additionally, many of the students from the London University were amongst the first generation in their families to attend University and were consequently anxious about the

effects of bereavement on their studies and their long- term success. Whilst students from London often addressed bereavement in a pragmatic manner, they commonly reported what they perceived as a need for further cultural awareness in both institutional and regulatory requirements. Many students felt that there was a need for further research and awareness building, so that attitudes to bereavement were more congruent with the core values of the social work profession particularly around anti-oppressive practice and diversity.

At the West Sussex University, students did not report the same financial and practical issues as their counterparts in London. However, they did link practical tasks, such as having to sell a house, to detrimental outcomes for their mental and emotional wellbeing, particularly when related to the particular pressures of a social work degree programme. Additionally, whilst London students were quite vocal in reporting their bereavements, despite their frequent frustrations, students at the West Sussex University were more likely to avoid support for fear of stigmatisation following a bereavement. West Sussex University students reported using alternative forms of assistance more frequently than London students, who more commonly discussed religion as a support mechanism. The data from the West Sussex University, whilst very limited, resonates with a dominant western cultural attitude to death in which people may be very reluctant to discuss any aspects of grief or bereavement (YouGov, 2018).

One of the major ways in which bereavement impacted on study participants was through cumulative stress. This manifested in two main ways, either through an accumulation of practical and/or emotional difficulties, or through experience of multiple bereavements

across the lifespan. Both factors were more common amongst the London students, who had significantly less economic affluence than those at the West Sussex University, but were also more likely to experience multiple bereavements due to larger families and the close bonds that existed within these. However, London students almost universally reported religious and other faith-based support structures which helped them to cope with the effects of bereavement.

In answer to the second research question, participants highlighted a need for extending understanding and support for bereavement across the two institutions. Many study participants mentioned referrals to counselling, which some of them welcomed, whilst others felt this was unhelpful, as they wanted specific practical help with assignments or financial matters. Students at both Universities were concerned about maintaining their academic work, but regulatory requirements limited the available support and frequently exacerbated existing financial concerns. Participants in London reported a need to increase cultural insight and awareness around bereavement, both in teaching and support which they identified as intensifying the practical pressures on them. However, in West Sussex, a more traditional western cultural taboo around discussing death and bereavement led to students seeking support from often unexpected sources. At both institutions, participants mentioned a perceived incongruence between the ethics and values of social work and the lack of flexibility in applying professional standards, particularly where these concerned diversity or economic issues.

Findings from this small study present various implications for both social work education and social work educators. Whilst the study is limited in number of participants the authors

have learned a great deal from the findings and believe that there are some distinctive areas which would benefit from further research. As the literature review demonstrated, there is a dearth of research focussing specifically on social work student's experience of death and bereavement, although it is recognised that these can have a profound effect on their own mental and emotional wellbeing, as well as their capacity to support others. Students in the study all suggested that death and bereavement should be further embedded within social work programmes in three main ways. Firstly, that tutors and indeed all academic staff should receive training in the potential impacts and associated stresses created by bereavement, death and dying, enabling them to offer effective and appropriate pastoral support and signposting, rather than simple condolences. We recommend that aspects of death and dying are integrated throughout the curriculum, rather than being linked to old age, as is traditional on many Social Work programmes. For example, aspects of death and dying could be integrated into lectures on ethics; contexts; law and other core Social work offers. Given the significant findings of this small study relating to the specific cultural implications of death and dying, we also suggest that these are addressed openly within the curriculum as part of core learning about social justice, diversity, and anti-oppressive practice. This work is already well under way in the London University with the introduction of a new institution-wide Social Justice Framework. Creating integrated opportunities to discuss death and dying directly would break some of the taboos which still surround the topic and cause it to be sequestered in Electives , or discussions only of 'old age' or 'end of life.'

Although we recommend that faculty are trained to work with bereaved students, particularly where there is a very diverse demographic, we also recognise that staff have limitations in what they can offer and that they must make use of other support services.

Linked to this is the data on Practice Educators who, in both institutions were either cited as being too task oriented, or conversely overprotective. Sheila's experience of being told she had to be 'more resilient when it comes to death,' and her subsequent questioning of herself is particularly striking and demonstrates how influential Practice Educators are for students. The data suggests that they too may need greater training and indeed support with managing bereavement in their own practice, as well as to assist with sustaining their students.

The second way in which study participants suggested that death and bereavement should be further embedded within social work programmes was via specialist training. Particular forms of death and dying, for example suicide and gun crime, may create wellbeing issues in practice and therefore participants suggested that specialist knowledge should be embedded within the social work curriculum, along with principles of self-care when dealing with traumatic forms of bereavement. Thirdly, whilst the study did not set out expressly to study cultural differences, the findings suggest that death education and concomitant support has focussed largely on a dominant white, western Christian paradigm, which risks treating bereavement as a homogenous experience. Whilst this paradigm tends to package grief and bereavement within organisational, institutional, temporal and often bureaucratic processes, the students who participated in this study have demonstrated the complexity of personal and professional experiences of bereavement and the ways in which these relate to dominance, power and control. Leah, for example, did not have the financial capacity to return to her country of origin to bury her loved one and therefore needed to qualify and find work before she could do so. Whilst many of the student participants were stoic about the consequences of their particular experiences of bereavement, the resulting anxiety may have profound effects on the ways in which grief is processed, with consequent

implications for student mental health and wellbeing. Moving forwards, we believe there is a clear need for further studies within the field of social work which focus on ‘cultural and subcultural differences in bereavement as a major priority’ (Laurie and Neimeyer, 2008, p.174) and which further excavate the power differentials associated with these.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the results of a small pilot study exploring the impacts of bereavement on the wellbeing of social work students within two UK University Social Work programmes. The study was limited by both sample size and scope, but findings are nevertheless useful in identifying a need for further research into aspects of death and bereavement, together with curriculum development under the new regulator, Social Work England. The study shows that factors associated with bereavement may have a significant impact on the wellbeing of social work students and indicates a concomitant need for upskilling social work tutors and placement personnel, as well as embedding fundamental knowledge regarding specific forms of death, within social work education.

Although the study described within the article did not specifically set out to study cultural and ethnic factors, the free association narrative method allowed participants to speak openly and without interruption, or direction and thereby identified a significant need for much greater understanding of power differentials related to culture. At present, the study suggests that a dominant western Christian paradigm prevails which serves to disenfranchise bereaved students and particularly those from BAME backgrounds. Within this, we also recognise our own limitations as authors and researchers, but nevertheless

recommend further, larger scale research to excavate these power differentials, as well as informing the core Social Work curriculum. Underpinning all the data is a clear need for training and knowledge, which recognises the diversity of bereavement experiences and enables both practitioners and educators to offer effective support. Despite our own limitations and that of this small study, we anticipate that the findings from this pilot project will make an important contribution to social work education and practice, as well as having implications for further research and perhaps eventually for bereavement policy. As one of the London University participants suggested:

'I was thinking that in the future there could be a law, a policy for employers to bring that aspect after bereavement ...to have the duty...to support people emotionally, not leaving them to go through things alone, already the job is on them because I see so many pressures on the staff...' (Leah, London)

References

- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol 3 (2)
- Cagle, J. and Kovacs, P. (2009) Education: A complex and empowering social work intervention at the End of Life, *Health and Social Work* Vol: 34 (1)
- Chan, W, Tin, A; Wong, K (2017) Effectiveness of an experiential workshop for enhancing helping professionals' self-competence in death work in Hong Kong: a randomised control trial, *Health and Social Care in the Community* 25(3) pp.1070 - 1079
- Collins, S; Coffey, M, and Morris, M (2010) Social work students: Stress, support and well-being, *British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 40 pp. 963-982
- Collins, S. (2006) Mental health difficulties and the support needs of social work students: Dilemmas, tensions and contradictions, *Social Work Education*, 25(5) pp.446 -61

Dyregrov, K (2004) Bereaved parents' experience of research participation, *Social Science and Medicine*, vol 58, 2, pp.391 -400

Fulton, A (2012) Dealing with death and dying: A letter to social work practicum students, *Reflections*, 18 (2)

Gov. Uk (2019) Universities must do more to tackle ethnic disparity. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-must-do-more-to-tackle-ethnic-disparity> Accessed: 18 April 2020

Holloway, M. and Taplin, S. (2013) Editorial, *British Journal of Social Work* vol 43 pp.203-205

Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, London, Sage

Kramer, B (1998) Preparing Social Workers for the Inevitable: A preliminary investigation of a course on grief, death and loss, *Journal of Social Work Education*, Vol 34 (2) pp. 211- 228

Lawson, E (2014) Disenfranchised grief and social inequality: bereaved African Canadians and oppositional narratives about the violent deaths of friends and family members, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol 37(11) pp.2092 – 2109

McClatchey, I.S and King, S (2015) The impact of death education on fear of death and death anxiety among human services students, *Omega – Journal of Death and Dying* Vol 71 (4) 343 -361

McIlwaine, L; Scarlett, V; Venters, A and Ker, J.S (2007) The different levels of learning about dying and death: an evaluation of a personal, professional and interprofessional learning journey, *Medical Teacher*, 29 pp.151 - 159

Parker, J (2006) Developing perceptions of competence during practice learning. *British Journal of Social Work*, 36 (6), pp.1017 - 37

Polkinghorne, D (1998) *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*, USA, SUNY press

Prigerson, H; Wolfson, L and Shear, K (1997) Case histories of traumatic grief, *Omega – Journal of death and dying*, Volume 35(1) pp.9 -24

Raftery, J (2018) *How London Met was turned around*, Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2018/10/18/london-met-turned-around/>

Accessed: 21 October 2018

Office for Students (2020) *Mental Health* Available at:

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/mental-health/what-we-re-doing/> Accessed: 19 April 2020

- Sanford, J (2018) Leading during loss: Death of a beloved faculty member, *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 34, pp. 159 -60
- Stanley, N; Mallon, S; Bell, J and Manthorpe, J (2010), Suicidal students' use of and attitudes to primary care services *Primary Health Care Research & Development* 11, pp. 315-325
- Silverman, P (2013) Lessons I have learned, *British Journal of Social Work* 43 pp.216 -232
- Stirling, B; Dryud Furman, L; Benson, P; Canda, E; Grimwood, C (2010) A comparative survey of Aotearoa New Zealand and UK Social Workers on the role of Religion and Spirituality in Practice, *British Journal of Social Work* (2010) 40 pp. 602 – 621
- Thorley, C (2017) Not by degrees: Improving student mental health in the UK's Universities. Institute for Public Policy Research. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/files/2017-09/1504645674_not-by-degrees-170905.pdf Accessed 18 October 2018
- Turner, D (2017) *Perspectives on the experience of sudden, unexpected child death: The very worst thing?* Palgrave McMillan, London, UK
- Turner, D (2014a) Telling the story: what can be learned from parent's experience of the professional response following the sudden, unexpected death of a child? PhD thesis, University of Sussex, UK. Available at Sussex Research Online:
<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/50402/>
- Turner, D (2014b) Memories are made of this: personal reflections on the creation and maintenance of memorials and mementoes, *Bereavement Care*, 33(3) pp. 92 -96
- Universities UK (2018) *Minding our Future: Starting a conversation about the support of student mental health.* Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/minding-our-future> Accessed 18 October 2018
- Van Breda, A (2017) Students are humans too: Psychosocial vulnerability of first-year students at the University of Johannesburg, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 31, pp.246 - 262
- Vejar, C (2013) When students encounter death, *Research starters: Education*. Available at: <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/delivery?sid=24b84b52=a87d-4a0f> Accessed : 18 October, 2018
- Yang, S.C (2012) The study of good death and attitudes toward good death among university students majoring in nursing, social work and teacher education, Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations. Available at: http://etd.lib.nsysu.edu.tw/ETD-db/ETD-search/view_etd?URN=etd-0219112-145228 Accessed : 18 October, 2018
- Wengraf, T (2011) *BNIM short guide bound with the BNIM Detailed manual.* Version date: March 2011. Available at: tom@tomwengraf.com. Accessed March 2012

