

The complexity of couple communication in bereavement, Hooghe, Neimeyer, Rober

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The complexity of couple communication in bereavement:

An illustrative case study

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Sharing grief experiences, or “storying” grief, can be a key resource in adapting to loss, one that can contribute to stronger bonds and relational intimacy within the family. In this paper we conceptualize communication between grieving family members in terms of three “*D processes*,” emphasizing the extent to which such communication is *dialectic*, *dialogic* and *dynamic* in nature. We will illustrate the complexity of sharing about a mutual loss, focused on these three features, by referring to a case study of a couple coping with the death of a child in the context of a newly formed family. Rather than unilaterally advocating the promotion of open communication, we suggest that therapists working with bereaved families first discuss the complexities of communication with the family members, specifically those concerning talking and keeping silent, and explore the different meanings associated with sharing grief experiences with each other.

When families are confronted with the death of a loved one, it is generally assumed that the expression of one's emotional reactions to the loss is an important component of adaptive grieving (Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech & Van den Bout, 2002). Moreover, clinicians argue that open and honest communication about one's grief experiences with family members enhances couple and family relationships (f.e. Shapiro, 2008; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Accordingly, *not* sharing grief, or remaining silent, is seldom addressed in an appreciative way.

In the first part of the paper we will describe this dominant paradigm of approaching communication in grief. In the second part we will draw on several (related) theories on relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986, Morson & Emerson, 1990) to propose a more complex view of communication, specifically focused on the *dialectical*, *dialogical* and *dynamic* features of family communication in bereavement. Drawing on a clinical case study, we will conclude by illustrating the implications of these three "*D processes*" for consultation with grieving families.

### **The dominant paradigm of communication in bereavement**

#### **Storying grief experiences**

The notion of the necessity of 'grief work' has long dominated grief literature and practice (e.g. Freud, 1917; 1957; Lindemann, 1944; Worden, 1991, 2002). The traditional grief work hypothesis postulates that the bereaved need to confront and express their feelings of grief in order to be able to work through their loss and adjust to the changed life without the deceased. Giving words to grief in a relationship with a trusted other could serve more than an expressive function, however. From a narrative and meaning making perspective, 'storying' one's experiences is a way to create coherence and to make sense of our lives through connecting the elements of experience in time (Bruner, 1990; White & Epston,

1990). When our sense of self and our worldview is threatened by loss (Janoff-Bulman, 2004), when the basic plot and theme of one's life story are profoundly shaken or shattered (Neimeyer, 2001), the resulting inability to "make sense" of the loss emerges as a powerful predictor of the intensity of the bereaved parent's grief symptomatology (Keesee, Currier & Neimeyer, 2008). Under such circumstances, telling one's story in the presence of responsive others is thought to be one major vehicle through which meaning reconstruction and healing occurs (e.g. Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2000; Romanoff & Thompson, 2006). Confronted with death, we need to create stories to make order of disorder and to find meaning in the meaningless (Gilbert, 2002; Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). Considerable empirical research, both quantitative (e.g. Harvey, 1996; Keeley & Koenig Kellas, 2005; Smyth, 1998) and qualitative (Riches & Dawson, 1996a, 1996b, 1998; Weber, Rowling & Scanlon, 2007; Wheeler, 2001; Woodgate, 2006) has found support for the beneficial effects of narrating one's experiences related to the loss, or storying grief.

### **The social sharing of grief**

To understand the phenomenon of storying we need to consider the interactive context in which it takes place (Gilbert, 2002; Gudmundsdottir, 2006; Nadeau, 1998; Neimeyer, 1998). From a social constructionist perspective, the act of storytelling is an interactive co-constructive process resulting in a dialogue between people (Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Gilbert, 2002; Nadeau, 1998, 2008;; Rosenblatt, 1994). The sharing of grief experiences with others is important for the bereaved individual as it contributes to the testing and exploring of one's view of the world in relation to the views of others (Gilbert, 2002) and to receiving validation and social support for one's loss (Gilbert, 1997; Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004, Walsh, 2007). Furthermore, it reduces emotional distress and facilitates coping with loss (Rosenblatt & Elde, 1990; Rubin, 1986; Sedney, Baker, Gross, 1994). The sharing of grief also has an impact on social contexts, particularly on couple and family

relationships (e.g. Byng-Hall, 1991;; Kissane & Bloch, 2002; Penn, 2001; Shapiro, 2008; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Shared stories can bring family members closer together (Rober, van Eesbeek & Elliott, 2006; Sedney et al., 1994), create stronger bonds (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1998), and enhance their sense of togetherness and relational intimacy (Gilbert, 1989; Gottlieb, Lang & Amsel, 1996; Hagemester & Rosenblatt, 1997). Numerous quantitative studies have demonstrated strong associations between concepts such as social sharing, family communication, family cohesion, marital satisfaction, social support and grief outcome (Greeff, & Human, 2004; Kissane et al. 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999; Sandler, et al., 2003; Traylor, Hayslip, Kaminski, York, 2003; Yelsma & Marrow, 2003). Based on the repeatedly occurring association between family communication and grief outcome, the importance of open and honest communication within the family is often highlighted (e.g. Greeff & Human, 2004; Kissane & Bloch, 2002; Rynearson, 2001; Walsh, 2007; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Qualitative studies have shown that the sharing of feelings through conversation with the partner is experienced as a key factor in both parents' grief resolution. Furthermore, marital discourse is perceived by grieving partners as important for constructing and maintaining self identity (Riches & Dawson, 1996a, 1998), shared reality and mutual support (Gilbert, 1989; Rosenblatt et al, 1990), and an increased sense of security, togetherness and understanding of each other (Gilbert, 1989). Within the family context, Nadeau (1998, 2008), Gudmundsdottir (2006) and Koenig and Trees (2006) stress the importance of communication and interaction in the creation of family meanings around the death.

### **The meaning of silences and *not* sharing grief**

In most studies on family communication and grief, both the sharing of grief experiences and communicative openness are implicitly favored. Sparse attention is given to the importance of remaining silent or the possible risks associated with sharing grief experiences with others. Concepts like *'withholding'*, *'keeping experiences to oneself'*, *'remaining silent'* and *'not sharing'* have a negative connotation in Western culture. Not sharing painful emotions in the family is sometimes referred to as a *'conspiracy of silence'* (Helmuth & Steinitz, 1978; Johnson, 1987) and is described as a 'communication problem' (Schwab, 1992). It is often associated with a "cut-off" in meaningful communication, intimacy and emotional engagement (Gilbert, 1989; Rando, 1984; Schwab, 1992; Silverman & Silverman, 1979), and with increases in blame, guilt and conflict (Vess, Moreland & Schwebel, 1985). Furthermore, family secrecy is believed to contribute to instability in family dynamics, mystification, emotional disconnect and the formation of factions (Sedney et al., 1994). In recent years, however, empirical research has raised doubt on this generally assumed beneficial effect of emotional disclosure and social sharing of an emotional event (Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech & Philippot, 1998; Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2005; Zech & Rimé, 2005). Studies have failed to show a recovery effect following the sharing of emotions in the context of bereavement (Meads & Nauwen, 2005; Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, & van den Bout, 2002; Zech & Rime, 2005). On the contrary, the expression of emotions can intensify distress and interfere with one's active coping (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). Researchers studying the association between grief and avoidance found some indication that not expressing grief could function as a resilient way of being able to distract oneself from the loss (Boelen, van den Bout & van den Hout, 2006). Moreover, from a family perspective, Kissane and his colleagues (2006) , found that the specific relational context of the bereaved family determines for the efficacy of family communication about grief. For families characterized by anger and hostility, communication between family

members can be detrimental rather than connecting, even in the presence of a skilled therapist attempting to facilitate the interaction.

### **A more complex view of communication in grief**

Looking closely at any case of grief following the loss of a loved one, the dominant approach to grief communication fails to attend to the specific context of the bereaved. Several authors have pointed to the importance of the context to be able to understand stories or the act of storytelling (Gilbert, 2002; Fiese & Wamboldt, 2003; Neimeyer, 2001; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Sedney et al, 1994). A more contextualized view would, at minimum, entail the consideration of the combination of contextual factors such as the uniqueness of the bereaved individual (e.g. Davis, Lehman & Silver, 2000; Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2006), the person of the listener as a co-narrator (Bavelas, Coates, Johnson, 2000; Burke, Neimeyer & McDevitt-Murphy, 2010), the relational context in which one shares with others (e.g. Kissane, et al, 2006; Kissane, Lichtenthal & Zaider, 2008), the moment of communication (e.g. Kamm & Vandenberg, 2001) and the content of what is being shared (e.g. Capps, Bonanno, 2000; Finkenauer & Rimé, 1998). Considering these contextual factors, the adequacy of storying or sharing grief might sometimes be questioned, whereas maintaining a discreet silence about one's loss experience might well be an adaptive response in some instances, much as moments of silence in psychotherapy have been found to be adaptive as well as obstructive to the therapy process (Frankel, Levitt, Murray, Greenberg & Angus, 2006).

In this paper we want to approach communication as a process between people over time. We specifically will focus on the meanings of talking and silences in a *dialectical*, *dialogical* and *dynamic* approach. These features are undoubtedly intertwined with each other. However, for purposes of discussion, we chose to discuss them separately. As an illustration of this view of communication, we will make use of a case study of a newly

formed family experiencing the loss of a child. As the family lives in the Flemish portion of Belgium, the interviews, letters and journal entries on which we draw were originally in Dutch, and translated by the first author, who was also the interviewer.<sup>1</sup>

### **An illustration: The case of Hilde and Koen**

Hilde, a 44 year-old grieving mother, lost her son Jasper to brain cancer 11 years ago when he was 13 years old. Five years before his death, Jasper's parents divorced. Both Jasper and his sister Emma, who is two years younger than Jasper, lived with their mother. One year after the divorce, Hilde started a new relationship with Koen and together they had another child, Julie, a third child for Hilde, a first child for Koen. Three years later Jasper was diagnosed with brain cancer. During the period of chemotherapy and surgical operations, Hilde tried to be with her son as much as possible, while Koen mainly took care of the household and the two other children. It was a difficult period for the family, but they kept hoping and they tried to have family life continue on as usual. After approximately 18 months of anguishing efforts to defeat the illness, Jasper died.

### **Grief communication as a dialectic process**

*"I controlled what has to be controlled in our culture: raw emotions are not nice to look at, expressive pain is annoying to others. We tried hard to spare each other. Mainly, we remained silent about the unspeakable. It is one of the most persistent paradoxes that I keep struggling with during all my reflections: the stereotype that "words fail" is completely right in my opinion, but on the other hand (at least in our culture) exactly those same words are the only way not to disconnect from everyone... I do remember attempts to describe the*

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<sup>1</sup> The story of Hilde and Koen (pseudonyms) has been the subject of an intensive case study comprised of both a thematic and a narrative analysis of the experiences of this family after the loss. This case study is based on an in-depth interview, supplemented with letters Hilde wrote to Jasper during the first years after his death. This study is part of a broader institutionally reviewed and approved research project on the experiences of parents sharing grief with each other after the loss of their child to cancer. Although our research question involves the partner relationship, in this case study we will mainly focus on the mother because of her position as a single mother to Jasper. The family has given informed consent for the (disguised) use of their interview responses.



*'wasteland' on the inside. ... The only intention [of talking] is that bridges are made, that moments of connection can be created''.*

With these words Hilde expresses the internal conflict she feels about verbalizing her emotions. On the one hand she draws on metaphors to express how she feels, to feel connected with others (attempts to describe the “wasteland” inside, so that “bridges are built” between her and others), and, at the same time, there are things that restrain her from doing so. She does not want to annoy other people. She wants to spare her family members from this pain, a stance that for her expresses core Flemish values of “being strong” and managing ones own emotions, a cultural attitude widely shared in northern European, North American, and other English-speaking societies. More than that, she acknowledges that “words fail to express the unspeakable.” How can one express such a devastating experience as the loss of a child? Grief, as a multifaceted phenomenon, is beyond words.

Viewed in a *dialectical* framework, the phenomenon of self disclosure is broadened to focus on the inherent tension between ‘openness’ and ‘closedness’, in an ongoing interplay with one another (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Toller, 2005). There is a natural and ongoing tension between the wish to be open and share with others, and at the same time the desire to keep thoughts and feelings private. The same dialectical contradiction between being open and being closed can be found in Toller’s study (2005), examining how bereaved parents experience communicating about their deceased child with individuals in their social network. The parents in Toller’s sample chose to share their grief with friends and family members, and at the same time most of them were hesitant to be open as they were afraid of the potentially negative reactions of others, a very real and painful prospect as research by Burke and her colleagues (2010) documents. This internal conflict or ‘ambivalence over emotional expression’ (King and Emmons, 1990, 1991), which is better characterized by the competing goals of wanting to show how one is feeling yet fearing the consequences of such

self expression rather than the simple absence of emotional expressiveness, has been shown to be detrimental to subjective well-being in several studies (Katz & Campbell, 1994; King, 1998; Mongrain & Vetteese, 2003; Tucker, Winkelman, Katz, Bermas, 1999).

### **Grief communication as a relational dialogical process**

Based on the work of the Russian social philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), the relational approach of Baxter and Montgomery (1996) situates the unfinalisable tension between openness and closedness on a relational level. From a dialogical perspective, the contradiction is situated not only in the individual persons, but also in the communication between relationship parties (Baxter, 2004b). Baxter recognizes a constant tension in relationships between the two contradictory needs: the need for disclosure (openness) and the need for secrecy (closedness). She relies on some of Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) concepts, especially his idea that language is the product of dynamic, tension-filled processes in which two tendencies are involved: *centripetal* (centralizing, unifying) forces and *centrifugal* (decentralizing, differentiating) forces. Contrary to Hegelian dialectics that prescribes the finalization of dialectic tensions in a synthesis, Bakhtin contends that these dialogical processes are unfinalisable, and the tension between the two opposing forces never finds a solution. As Baxter writes, "This view stands in sharp contrast to dominant approaches to relational communication...[that] have articulated the grand narratives of connection, certainty and openness" (Baxter, 2004). In these traditional "modernist" approaches to relational communication, autonomy is linked with distance and secrecy between partners. Openness is linked with relational intimacy and closedness is viewed as problematic and unhealthy. From a dialogical perspective, however, these traditional ideas underestimate the importance of the continuous dynamic interplay of centripetal and centrifugal forces in relationships, as well as the uniqueness of every moment and the shaping force of the time and place of the dialogical exchange.

In the case of Hilde and Koen, Hilde remembers attempts to describe what she feels, to make a connection with Koen in her grief, not to be alone in this suffering, to create a communal story, but at the same time this grief often felt like *her* grief. *“It was no subject of conversation anymore, it was my inner life... it was my territory....”* Remarkably, while struggling with what she called her *“internalized grief”* (in Dutch: *“verinnerlijkte rouw”*), both Hilde and Koen wrote letters to each other. In one letter Hilde asked Koen’s permission to find a way out of her grief on her own. She proposed to Koen: *“Let me find a way out, I ask you to allow me the freedom and the space...”*. In turn, Koen wrote a letter to Hilde in which he asserted that he had *“faith in her heart and in her mind”*, and that he trusted her ability to find her own way to cope with her grief. The freedom she needed to be able to concentrate on herself, and not connect with others, was a freedom they negotiated in connection with each other. For Hilde, Koen’s trust was important: *“Maybe [your trust] will save me: it makes a difference if there is someone who believes that it will get better”*. In a sense, they connected in their agreement not to connect in this grief.

When dialogue about the loss does occur, the listener is viewed as actively present in the moment (Bakhtin, 1986). The act of storytelling is an interactive co-constructive process, in which the listener could be considered as a co-narrator (Bavelas, Coates & Johnson, 2000). All interact with one another, both verbally and nonverbally (Gilbert, 2002; Nadeau, 1998, 2008; Riches & Dawson, 1996b; Rosenblatt, 1994). All utterances are connected with past utterances and invite other utterances in a dialogical chain (Bakhtin, 1986). In contrast to a traditional understanding of emotional disclosure, in which the emotion ‘to be told’ is already a completely formed story that can be articulated to a neutral listener, from a dialogical perspective the story unfolds in the moment and all participants (storyteller as well as addressees) in the dialogue contribute to the unfolding story. In an ongoing dialogue, a story

is being made together; meanings are being co-created, resulting in a new story, that is unique and unrepeatable (Bakhtin, 1981; Gergen, 1999; Nadeau, 2008).

Referring to the interaction and interdependence between the interlocutors, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) use the concepts of ‘openness *to*’ and ‘closedness *to*’ to specify the degree of receptivity and responsiveness toward another’s disclosures. One person’s ‘openness *with*’ is interdependent with the other person’s ‘openness *to*’ (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Similarly, in the bereavement literature, various authors have pointed to the importance of the responsiveness of the listener for the bereaved to be able to emotionally disclose his or her feelings of grief (e.g. Burke, Neimeyer & McDevitt-Murphy, 2010; Mancini & Bonanno, 2006). Perceiving the listener as receptive, supportive and willing to help (Kelly & McKillop, 1996) or discreet and non-judgemental (Mancini & Bonanno, 2006) is crucial in explaining the beneficial effects of sharing one’s grief.

For Hilde and Koen, talking with each other was often difficult. Sometimes one of them wanted to start a conversation about the difficult time since Jasper died, while the other was hesitant or was not receptive at that time. In one of her letters to Koen, she regrets the moments that he was unable to listen: *“Sometimes I tried to ask you to be with me in my pain, to listen and watch my pain. You couldn’t”* (p 49).

The first years after Jasper’s death, the couple described a relational climate that was ‘*suffocating*’ for all family members, making it very hard or even impossible to talk or listen. Hilde stated: *“A family is very small, very closed.... We couldn’t breathe in our house... there was no air.... Sometimes I think grief is suffocating.”* Explaining what she means by this suffocation, she added: *“It is suffocating inside, for each of us.... We did not succeed in [talking], we could not clear the air in a way that we could talk about it”*. Pointing to the interactional dynamics in this, Koen replied: *“When [the silence] lasted too long, you [Hilde] got nervous. When you [Hilde] wanted to talk, she [her daughter] shut down.”* Clearly, the

interactional process was much more complex than one person simply wanting to share her/his grief with the other, while the other was not willing or able to listen. In their relationship with each other, they all struggled with a continuous interplay between unifying and differentiating forces in the context of a 'grief-suffocating climate'.

### **Grief communication as a dynamic process**

Every dialogue takes place in a specific temporal-spatial context. Referring to Bakhtin's notion of 'chronotope' (Bakhtin, 1981), Baxter states: "Communication is always situated in historical, environmental, cultural, relational, and individual chronotopes, or contexts. The chronotopic nature of communication obligates researchers to take both sociospatial and temporal contexts into account" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p 44-45). Every act of communication or silence must be understood in its context of time and space. When and where do they occur? What was said previously? What is anticipated to happen next? Who is present, who is not? What is the relational context? And so on.

Grief and grief communication is a process in time. The intensity of grief processing (thinking about the deceased, searching for meaning and positive memories of the deceased) declines with time (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Pressman & Bonanno, 2007). The desire to talk about the loss with others and the perceived benefits in doing so can change over time as well (Kamm & Vandenberg, 2001; Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, & Rimé, 2000; Zech, Rimé & Pennebaker, 2007).

Hilde and Koen, looking back on their grief communication, portray a search process that unfolded over time. How they approached each other was different in the beginning than it is now. Hilde recounts that in the beginning, when Jasper was hospitalized, "*I didn't have much to say. I could not talk about it. Nor did it do me any good....*" After Jasper died, they describe some very difficult years struggling to stay emotionally connected with each other. Hilde needed time on her own, "*to be able to breathe*". When she was on her own, in silence,

she didn't feel the "*pressure to be whole*" as much. "*Being on my own, I could just be broken*". At times though, Hilde felt lonely and regretted the difficulties in sharing their grief with each other. At other times, they both felt inner calm not expecting the other to be the conversational partner any longer, "*adjusting the expectations... a kind of frustration about unmet expectations faded away*". Instead of talking, she started to write letters to her dead son. Koen had built an attic room for her so she could be on her own with Jasper, undisturbed. In this room, Hilde felt the space and peace she needed. This was a place where she could stay connected with Jasper. She experienced her monologic communication with her son as helpful: "*Verbalizing unspoken thoughts and feelings... to create some space for the chaos in my head*". After some time though Hilde felt the pressure to go on with life and to connect with her family: "*Being torn [between Jasper and my family] and the incompatibility of the love for a dead child with the love and care for a living family.*" In recent years Hilde and Koen have started to reconnect again. After almost ten years Koen states: "*By now, fortunately, we've come that far to be able to talk in a serene way about [the loss]*".

More than simply an evolution in their way of sharing, they also experienced an evolution in the meanings given to their sharing and not sharing over time. What was painful and disappointing at one time, was experienced as meaningful and constructive at another time. Not being able to share her feelings with her husband, Hilde early on felt lonely and frustrated. "*Back then, the decision to internalize my grief was born out of frustration*". However, looking back, Hilde says, this decision was also a strategic one, to save their couple relationship. She describes how it was important for their relationship that she found a way to stop expecting Koen to be there for her as a conversational partner. By internalizing her grief she saved the family from the burden of her unspeakable sorrow. Remaining silent about the pain and the grief over the loss of Jasper, Hilde let daily life take its course, omitted the grief as an obstacle from family life, offering space for her family to start again and to heal. As

Hilde noted in the interview: *“For us, [internalizing my grief] was the best way to go on living as a family, and to give our relationship and our family a future.”* New opportunities were created for them as a couple to connect. In spite, or maybe because of remaining silent or not sharing grief with each other, they felt that they succeeded in saving their relationship.

### **Discussion**

Ironically, perhaps, communication traditionally has been approached in a monologic way. Most often, scholars have only studied communication, expressiveness and self-disclosure without considering the dynamic interplay with other forces pulling towards silence, withdrawal and closedness. Therefore, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) propose to ‘rethink communication’ and argue for the ‘both/and’ interplay of openness and closedness in personal relationships. “The utterance is a complex phenomenon in which the said and the unsaid, the free and the constrained, and the inner and outer of speaking come together in a moment of interaction” (p. 151).

Equally, studies in the field of bereavement on the effectiveness of self-disclosure (e.g. Zech, Rimé & Pennebaker, 2007) and communication between family members (e.g. Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004) have not considered those forces leading the bereaved towards remaining silent or *not* communicating with others. While many scholars in the bereavement and family literature point to the importance of sharing grief in order to create a stronger bond, a sense of togetherness and relational intimacy (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1998; Gilbert, 1989; Gottlieb, Lang & Amsel, 1996; Hagemeister & Rosenblatt, 1997; Sedney et al., 1994), only few of them also mention the importance of taking a balanced view of the degree to which talking or not talking is beneficial for individual couples or families (Kissane et al, 2006; Rosenblatt, 2000a, 200b).

In this paper we argue for considering the complexity of the process of couple communication in the context of bereavement. Rather than approaching grief communication

as a necessary condition for all grieving couples at all times, we propose to consider the contextual factors, ambivalences and relational tensions at a specific moment in the grieving process of the individuals and relationships involved. Describing the dialectic, dialogic and dynamic features of grief communication, we have concentrated on the act of verbalizing one's grief towards the partner. However, we could reasonably question the necessity of the spoken word in order to connect with others in grief. Emotions also obviously can be expressed in nonverbal ways (Hughes, 2009), which might be as crucial to emotional connection with relevant others as the spoken word. As in the case of Hilde and Koen, words can fail to express the unspeakable. What it feels like to lose a child is beyond words. Still, it was important for them that moments of connection were created. Koen's expression of trust in Hilde's way of grieving, verbally, in a letter to her, and nonverbally, by building an attic for her where she could connect with her dead son, were most important.

Additionally, we could wonder about the cultural aspect of grief communication and emotional communication. Would it be more typical for bereaved Flemish people specifically, or people of northern European descent more generally, to connect in a nonverbal, silent way, than it would be for bereaved parents from other cultures? Regretfully, little is known about the way one's sociocultural context shapes and informs the social sharing of emotions (Singh-Manoux & Finkenauer, 2001). Although no significant differences are found for the rate of social sharing across European, Asian and North American samples (Rimé, 2009), Singh-Manoux & Finkenauer (2001) found that cultural background was reflected in the social sharing patterns of English and Indian populations. "Macro" dynamics in the social construction of bereavement clearly deserve greater attention on the part of scholars, researchers and clinicians (Neimeyer, Klass & Dennis, 2010).

### **Clinical implications**



A traditional approach, unilaterally promoting the expression of grief, fails to acknowledge the dialectic, dialogic and dynamic features of grief communication. For therapists working with bereaved families it might be useful to try to create a space and opportunity to explore with family members the possibility of sharing their grief experiences with others, while simultaneously acknowledging the difficulties of sharing and the good reasons family members might have to not share their experiences (Rober, 2002, 2006). This would mean that the clinician makes room to ‘talk about talking’ (Fredman, 1997) and attend to the possible tensions and hesitations (Rober, 2002, 2006) involved in sharing. How would it be to share your grief with others? Whom would you like to share your grief with? Which grief experiences would be helpful for you to talk about, and which wouldn’t? How would you like to share and what ways of sharing would be more difficult for you? What do you feel you might gain from not talking about your feelings?... and so on. In this exploration it could be important to recognize that it might be valuable for them not to share some (or all) feelings or thoughts, some (or all) of the time, with some (or all) ‘listeners’. This corresponds with Toller’s study (2005) in which bereaved parents taking control of communicative situations and being selective in their disclosure is central. In families, different members often take opposing positions on the usefulness of sharing their grief. This highlights the tension between sharing and not sharing within the family. This tension is constantly present as an important undercurrent of daily family life. Rather than encouraging all family members to share, and thus exclusively joining with those who predominantly feel the need to share, we propose that therapists explore the complex dialectics of expression and non-expression (Baxter, 2004) and attend to the different viewpoints of the family members. A better understanding of the possible risks associated with sharing as well as of the wish to remain silent about some things towards some people may lead to an increased tolerance for the differences within the couple or family.

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