Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

COPING SKILLS OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING LOSS AND GRIEF: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY AMONG CHINESE CHILDREN IN SALVATION ARMY, KUCHING WHO EXPERIENCED LOSS AND GRIEF

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Kota Samarahan
2008

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The project entitled 'Coping Skills of Children Experiencing Loss and Grief: A Descriptive Study among Chinese Children in Salvation Army, Kuching Who Experienced Loss and Grief' was prepared by Liong Siau Wui and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor Arts with Honours (Counselling).

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ABSTRACT

COPING SKILLS OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING LOSS AND GRIEF: A
DESCRIPTIVE STUDY AMONG CHINESE CHILDREN IN SALVATION ARMY,
KUCHING WHO EXPERIENCED LOSS AND GRIEF

Liong Siau Wui

This is a descriptive paper meant to study young children's grieving stages and their coping skills on loss. The researcher's intention is to identify the coping skills exhibits by children who have experienced loss of parent(s), the grieving stages gone through by children who have experienced loss of parent(s), and the emotional reactions of children have towards loss of parent(s). There are five (5) informants in this study, aged eleven (11) and twelve (12), with four (4) of them are boy. The material used in this study is the Nader's Post-Trauma Stress Disorder (PTSD) Coping Questions. Semi-structured interview, unstructured interview, and observations are the methods used in this study to collect data. The obtained data are then analysed through descriptive data analysis. There are three (3) main concepts and seven (7) sub-concepts being identified and discussed in this study, namely the denial stage, coping skills exhibit by the informants – self-talk, keeping busy, and seeking social support, and emotional state of the informants during the interview – denial, emotional numbness, anger, and irritability.

ABSTRAK

KEMAHIRAN MENANGGANI KEHILANGAN DAN KESEDIHAN OLEH KANAK-KANAK: SATU KAJIAN DISKRIPTIF DALAM KALANGAN KANAK-KANAK CINA DI SALVATION ARMY, KUCHING YANG MENGALAMI KEHILANGAN DAN KESEDIHAN

Liong Siau Wui

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tahap kesediahan dan juga kemahiran menanggani kehilangan oleh kanak-kanak. Niat pengkaji adalah untuk mengenal pasti kemahiran menanggani kesedihan yang ada pada kanak-kanak yang telah kehilangan ibubapa, tahap kesediahan yang dilalui oleh kanak-kanak yang telah kehilangan ibubapa, dan reaksi emosi yang ada pada kanak-kanak yang telah kehilangan ibubapa. Terdapat lima (5) orang informan yang terlibat dalam kajian ini, berumur sebelas (11) dan dua belas (12) tahun, di mana empat (4) orang dalam kalangan mereka merupakan budak lelaki. Bahan yang digunakan dalam kajian ini merupakan Nader's Post-Trauma Stress Disorder (PTSD) Coping Questions. Kaedah secara interview secara semi-structur, interview tidak berstruktur, dan pemerhatian telah digunakan untuk memperolehi data. Data yang diperolehi kemudiannya telah dianalisa secara diskriptif. Terdapat tiga (3) konsep utama dan tujuh (7) subkonsep telah dikenal pasti dan dibincangkan secara lanjut, iaitu tahap penafian (denial stage), kemahiran menanggani kehilangan dan kesedihan yang ada pada kanak-kanak (coping skills exhibit by the informants) – self-talk, keeping busy, and seeking social support, dan juga keadaan emosi informan semasa interview (emotional state of the informants during the interview) – denial, emotional numbness, anger, dan irritability.

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This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

"Grief is a sign of love. If a child is old enough to love, the child is old enough to grieve" (Duncan, 1992). Grief is an intense mental distress caused by loss or disappointment. Grieving is a process that involves a series of thoughts and feelings that come after loss, and is often accompanied by mourning and bereavement.

Today's world is full of uncertainties and is often shaken by traumatic events (such as natural disasters, separations, loss of a pet, and death of family members) which leaving us feeling helpless. Children especially, they are reactive to such events that make them feel unsafe. It may last for a long time, if it goes unnoticed.

Therefore, it is important that parents or caregivers to have sufficient information and knowledge on trauma and grieving, its impact on children, and how to help children to better understand and cope better when they are in such situations – children experiencing loss or death of family members particularly.

This chapter introduces the background of the study, problem statement, objectives, research questions, definitions, research conceptual, significance of the study, and limitations of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Research in the area of childhood bereavement has centred in three (3) issues: children's ability to grief, their reaction towards grief, and bereaved children's potential for psychopathology (Schoenberg, 1980; Worden, 1982, as cited in Tonkins and Lambert, 1996). Though many researches have been done, researchers seemed have put the least attention in treatment for bereaved children. Statistics have shown that out of 230 articles that discussed children and bereavement located in psychological journals from 1983 through 1989; only four (4) discussed psychotherapy for grieving children (Davis, 1989; Masterman and Reams, 1988; Schonfeld, 1989; Warmbrod, 1986, as cited in Tonkins and Lambert, 1996).

Today, only 63 articles added to the collection, and out of 297 articles, only 11 articles discussed treatment (include psychotherapy) for bereaved children. There is still much work needed to be done for children experiencing loss to help them cope better.

1.2 Problem Statement

Losses are inevitable and normal part of everyone's life including children. There are many forms of loss. Feeling of loss can be emerged from a very minor event such as losing a toy, losing a pet, losing a friend, moving to a new place, and to the extent of such major event as losing beloved one's (either separation or due to death) which caused great impact on the individual, of course to the children as well.

Often, adults seem to have sufficient coping mechanisms, and emotional and cognitive maturity to deal with loss compared to children (Furman, 1947; Krupnick and Solomon, 1987; Schoenberg, 1980, as cited in Tonkins and Lambert, 1996). Children seem to have less adequate coping skills, and are continually faced with reprocessing their grief at various developmental (cognitive and emotional) stages (Atwood, 1984; Matter and Matter, 1982; Moss and Moss, 1973; Reilly, Hasazi, and Bond, 1983; Worden 1982, as cited in Tonkins and Lambert, 1996).

This explains why children often have difficulties to cope with loss. Young children do not verbalise their feelings about a loss (National Cancer Institute, 2006). Normally, they hold back their feelings, rendering them appear unaffected. Indeed, they channel their feelings of loss through behaviours and plays, without adults realise it. These behaviours include thumb-sucking, temper tantrums, and excessive clinging, which all these behaviours had been given up prior to the loss. It might appear normal, but in fact, to some extent, it is as a result of grieving (Family Enhancement and Play Therapy Center, 2006).

1.3 Objectives

1.3.1   General Objective

The general objective of this study is to study young children's grieving stages and their coping skills on loss.

1.3.2   Specific Objectives

- To determine the coping skills adopted by children who have experienced loss of parent(s).
- To identify the grieving stages gone through by children who experienced loss of parent(s).
- To identify the emotional reactions of children towards loss of parents.

1.4 Research Questions

Research questions are formulated with the aim of clarifying what the study is supposed to reveal (Flick, 2006). There are three (3) research questions identified in this research to clarify the path of this study:

- What are the coping skills of children who have experienced loss of parent(s)?

- What are the grieving stages gone through by children who experienced loss of parent(s)?
- What are the emotional reactions of children towards loss of parent(s)?

1.5 Definitions

This section contains the definitions of important terms of the study. Conceptual definitions and operational definitions are provided in order to understand the terms in the perspective of the literature and the researcher respectively.

1.5.1 Loss

Conceptual Definition

The term loss is related to the permanent end or destruction of something. It involves more than a death of someone- it can involve the changes in social roles and expectations, changes in body image and function (Horn, Payne, & Relf, 2000). Loss could also be defined as the state of being deprived of or being without something one has had. Death is not the only loss a human might experience; yet it is the only loss that is validated as a legitimate grief experience (Littlewood, 1993).

Scholars started referring to death since scholarship began but it is generally agreed that the clinical study of reactions to loss began in the early years of the twentieth century with Freud's (1917), Mourning and Melancholia (Parkes, 1996). In the wake of loss, fixed patterns of homeostasis functioning will undergo change in intrapersonal, behavioural, biological and interpersonal areas (Rubin, 1999).

Operational Definition

Loss, in this study refers to the death of someone significant in life – parents. The researcher looks at the loss experienced by children. The study does not only

focus on the physical aspect of loss, it also looks at the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional aspect.

1.5.2   Grief

Conceptual Definition

The concept of grief describes the emotions and sensations accompanying the loss of someone or something dear. The word itself was originally derived from the Old French *grève*, meaning a heavy burden. In English "grief" connotes an experience of deep sorrow, one that touches every aspect of existence. Grief can literally "weigh down" the person who must face the reality of a gut-wrenching loss, taking both a psychological and physical toll on the bereaved person. Complex physiological and psychological responses may be extremely painful but can be overcome if faced and experienced (Jaffe–Gill, Smith, and Segal, 2007).

According to Stroebe and Schut (1998), grief is the primary emotional reaction to such a loss which incorporates diverse psychological and physical symptoms (as cited in Horn, Payne, & Relf, 2000). It is a complex amalgam of painful affects including sadness, anger, helplessness, guilt and despair (Raphael, 1999).

Grief is a normal affective response to overwhelming loss, characteristically the death of a loved person such as spouse, parent, child, which does not require therapeutic intervention if it runs an uncomplicated course. Grief includes a number of psychological, cognitive and somatic reactions that the bereaved individual usually, but not always, expresses. It has been defined as an emotional syndrome (Ringdal et al, 2001).

Operational Definition

Grief is the reactions shown by someone who faces the death of their love ones. The researcher looks at the emotional reactions of two children – a boy and a

girl respectively, towards the death of their parents. Other than that, the informant's behaviour and cognition reactions are also looked into in this research.

1.5.3 Coping Skills

Conceptual Definition

Noppe & Noppe (2004) refer successful coping as the ability to express one's feelings, problem solving, and rely upon sustained, supportive relationship. How a grieving person responses in terms of coping influences one's physical health and psychological well-being.

Operational Definition

Coping skills in this study includes the way the informants reacts to the behavioural, emotional and cognitive reactions a child goes through after the death of his or her parents. The reactions and the measures one takes to overcome the changes in his or her life after the death of her loved one positively will be taken into account.
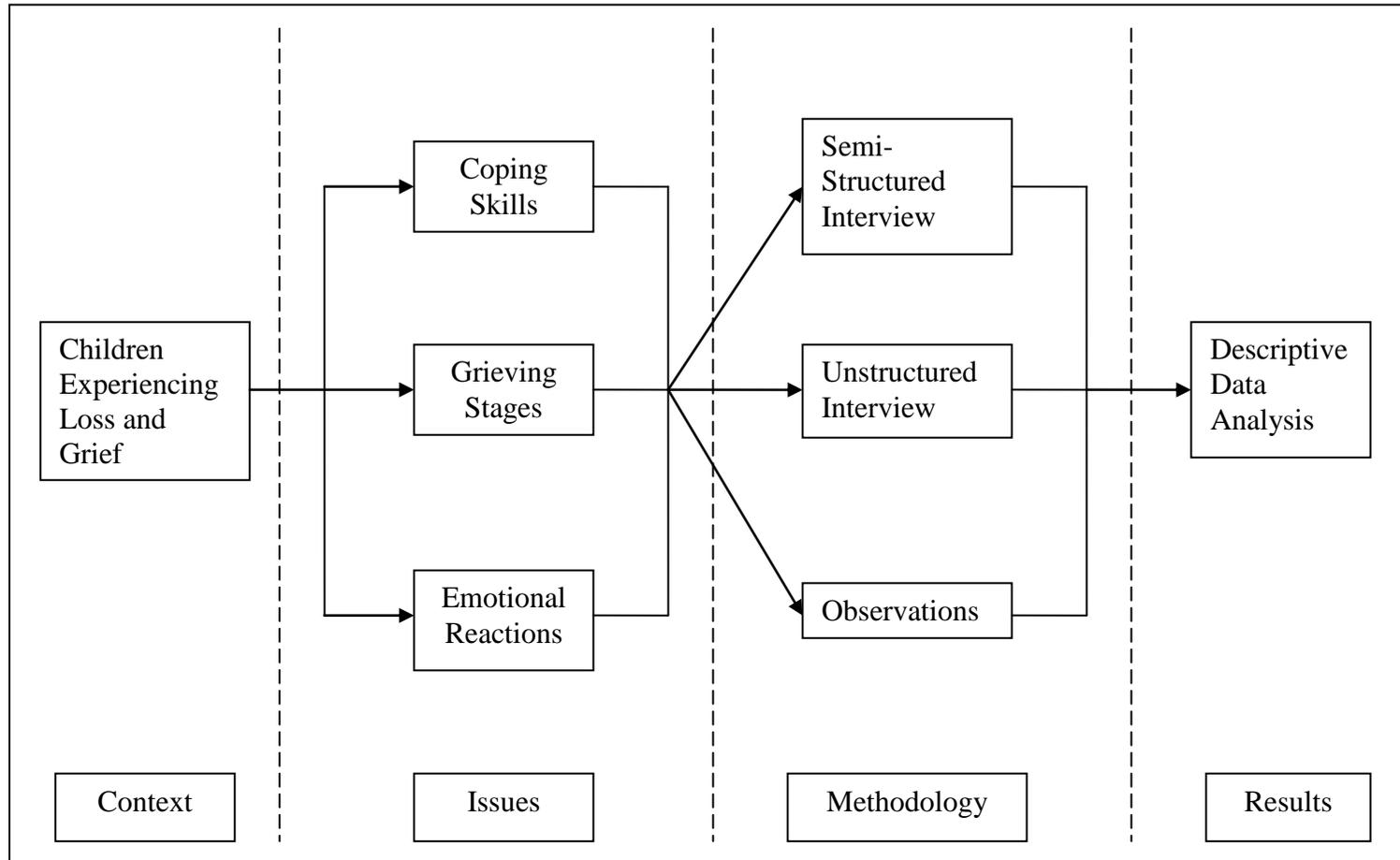
1.6 Research Conceptual

Figure 1.1: Research Conceptual of Children's Coping Skills on Loss and Grief.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to have an in-depth understanding about loss, and grieve, as well as the coping skills of young children who is currently experiencing loss − loss of parents in particular. This study is conducted to identify how a child copes with loss in order to help other child who are bereaved and in grief cope better.

By studying the grieving stages undergone by children, the researcher will be able to help other children who are grieving to understand the process they are going through and how to cope effectively.

Last but not least, the researcher also hoped to give a clearer picture to counsellors on how to deal better and in a more effective way with children who are dealing with loss and bereavement, since children are lack of the ability to express their feelings accordingly. Counsellors, especially the less experienced ones, could gain understanding on the changes in clients who are grieving, the stage they are in and the coping strategies they may apply.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this study is that it only involves the loss of parent(s) of a child by looking into the grieving stages and the coping skills after he or she experiencing loss. In fact, there are many more categories of loss, such as loss of a toy, loss of a friend, loss of an arm, moving, so on and so forth. And, there are other categories of loss in terms of significant people in a child's life, for example, friends, siblings, grandparents, uncle and aunty, and cousin and nephew. Therefore, one cannot over generalize that the findings in this study could be applied to every child who experience different kind of loss.

Besides, this study also does not take into account the level of attachment of the children with their deceased parent(s) in relative to the level of grieving. Marty, Readdick, and Walters (2004) stated that "parent–child attachment has been extensively confirmed as a central contributing factor to children's positive developmental outcomes." Therefore, it is important, in the future, researchers should

include the attachment theory in their research as well for a deeper study on children's grieving stages.

Another limitation is the level of understanding of the informants, young children especially. Informants will be given a set of questionnaires to look at their behaviour on coping with the loss of their parent(s). Young children may or may not understand the questions being asked and might interpret the questions wrongly. At the same time, the researcher does not access the children's level of understanding towards the questions thus, this affect the validity of the results of the study.

Since this is a descriptive research study, according to Lauer (2006), it can produce valid conclusions only about association. For more accurate and precise findings, it is suggested that causal statements should be avoided, as this is also mentioned in numerous statistics and research textbooks. For example, young children's low level of understanding causes them do not feel sad over their loss. As suggested, related phrases also should be avoided, such as level of intelligence. Making faulty claims or claims of causation based on the descriptive research study's result is a common mistake done by researcher (Lauer, 2006).

Other than that, this is a qualitative descriptive research study with only five (5) informants; the focus will be based solely on the individual's view on the topic. As mentioned above, individual's grieving process varies due to the uniqueness of each person. Although this study is designed to look at the different grieving process and coping skills between boy and girl, it could only be used as a guideline in general when one wish to study on the differences between boy and girls.

Furthermore, lack of literature review and previous research is also one of the limitations of this study. The existing literature about the children's coping skills is not adequate for deeper research which also a consequence of the lack of research in this area. This implies the lack of awareness and concern from researchers towards the mental heath of children.

1.9 Summary

This chapter provides an over view of the study. It focuses on the background of the study, the objectives, the research problem, the research question, the operational and conceptual definitions, as well as significant and limitations of the study. This could be helpful in gaining a basic understanding on the research conducted.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Creswell (1994) stated that the purpose of the literature is: (1) to share with the readers the results of other studies that are closely related to the study being reported (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1990); (2) to relate a study to the larger, ongoing dialogue in the literature about a topic, filling in gaps and extending prior studies (Marshall and Rossman, 1989); and, (3) to provide a framework for establishing the importance of the study, as well as a benchmark for comparing the results of a study with other findings.

Creswell (1994) also indicated that in a qualitative research, "the literature should be used in a manner consistent with the methodological assumptions; namely, it should be used inductively so that it does not direct the questions asked by the researcher." It is often used to "frame" the proposed problem statement at the beginning if the study. Literature also serves as a basis for advancing research questions or hypothesis.

Literature review of this study attempts to review the grieving stages gone through by the children who experienced loss and grief, children's coping skills, and their coping strategies in dealing with their feeling of loss and grief.