

**Lost for Words:
Children's Experiences of Grief Following the Death of a Sibling.
A Hermeneutic Literature Review**

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Abstract

The phrase ‘lost for words’ captures how hard it can be to talk or think about death. This difficulty can be heightened when children are left bereaved through the death of a sibling. Yet, literature on bereavement predominantly focuses on parent’s experiences of losing a child, rather than those of surviving siblings. This research presents an examination of children’s experiences of grief following the death of a sibling, through a hermeneutic literature review. The literature review explores psychotherapeutic and medical peer reviewed literature representing the voices of bereaved children and those close to them. It also uses art and poetry to add an embodied sense of how grief feels for children.

The findings of the literature review show that children have different understandings of the concept of death depending on their developmental stage. It shows that children process grief differently to adults and that clear communication and the support of empathetic adults are vital to help children make sense of the trauma of a bereavement. It also shows that the sibling relationship is highly significant and the rupture of this bond can have a profound impact on surviving siblings.

The research findings may prompt those working with bereaved families to consider the implications for surviving siblings and provide insight into best practice for supporting grieving children. Ideas for further research are presented at the end.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in acknowledgements), nor material which, to a substantial extent, has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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2023

Watching My Friend Pretending Her Heart Isn't Breaking

*“Six billion tons sounds impossible
until I consider how it is to swallow grief-
just a teaspoon and one might as well have consumed
a neutron star. How dense it is,
how it carries inside it the memory of collapse.
How difficult it is to move then.
How impossible to believe that anything
could lift that weight.”
(Trommer, 2019)*

Dedication

To all the siblings left behind, who lost a piece of themselves but will forever be connected.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the people who have come with me on this journey. It's been an experiential whirlwind and I have definitely come through the storm changed. Thank you to my supervisor for her endless patience. Thank you to my peers, teachers and supervisors for inspiring me from the beginning: for the tear filled laughter, the challenge to look at things from another perspective and for the continuous support, encouragement and passion. Thank you to my friends and family for helping me hold my head above water and always believing it was possible. Finally, to the siblings left behind, thank you for teaching me the importance of connection, curiosity, laughter, and above all the importance of continuing to show up, even when it is scary.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation is a hermeneutic literature review exploring how children experience grief following the death of a sibling. In this chapter, I introduce the foundations from which this dissertation has been built. This includes how I position myself as the researcher, the paths I follow to find my way to the research question and the aims of this study. It will introduce the philosophical horizon I stand on and explore findings from the initial background research into grief. It will also define some of the key terms used in the process and give an overview of the dissertation.

Starting Out

My best friend's brother, Tony, died when we were 5 or 6. I didn't really understand what was happening or why it was happening. I do remember Tony being sad and angry. I remember noticing him deteriorate as time moved on and I remember a turning point where he just stopped being there anymore. Our lives went on, we played in the street and ran home for ice blocks and lemonade or to negotiate more time to spend outside, but he was not part of it anymore. I remember my friend getting sick, something completely unrelated but being so scared of what that might mean, wondering if she too would die. I remember waiting and waiting in the hospital and the sense of relief when she was finally discharged home. Reflecting back, I see that something changed in me after Tony died. I realised that we were not invincible and that sometimes people died and they had no way of coming back. The innocence of childhood trust splintered like glass, the cracks letting doubt and fear seep through.

I guess that is where I start. Childhood grief, that shatters and shakes what was once understood about the world.

Foundations

I identify as European. The mountain I connect with is in Scotland. My ocean will always be the Atlantic and the land of sky that I grew up in will always be home. I immigrated to New Zealand 16 years ago, after spending years travelling. Something drove me to explore and I found myself as far away from family connections and from my ancestral roots as I could be. Yet, the connection to those roots remained, despite the thousands of kilometres between us, even while the elastic band of attachment stretched thin. Maybe, it is because of this that I am curious about family connections, about strong bonds that tie family together and how sometimes those bonds can continue beyond an individual lifespan.

I experience myself as an outsider in New Zealand and acknowledge that my pre-existing knowledge comes from a Western European model. Training to become a psychotherapist has taught me to stay curious and open minded and to try and understand the lived experience of others. I hope to bring this curiosity to my research.

I believe that we do not live in isolation and we are all heavily impacted by the connections we have to people and places. It is therefore important to acknowledge where I come from and to make my own subjectivity visible throughout the research. I will use first person pronouns rather than distancing myself from the writing by using a passive voice (Hildebrand, 1998). Through this I acknowledge these are my interpretations of literature, viewed through my own personal lens of experience. I am simply inviting the reader to consider what I find and be curious with me in the hope of gaining a deeper understanding of an often confronting subject.

Working on placement as a child psychotherapist in a children's hospital, grief seemed to be everywhere. As I explored different research avenues, I always came back to grief. I sensed grief with me as I walked down the corridors, like a black dog at my side. As I worked with clients and tried to connect with their worlds, I was filled with the imagery of grief, of heavy clouds, a heavy heart, a tangled ball knotted together, tight with confusion and pain, of emptiness. The threat of

loss, of isolation, of fading into nothingness seemed to hang in the air and underpinning it all there seemed to be a profound heartache and a deep longing for connection, to be seen, to be heard.

These experiences strengthened my desire to help children feel supported and understood and led me to a curiosity about how children experience loss. I was curious about children's experiences of losing siblings in particular. This was partly because of my friend's experience but also because it became apparent through my work in the playroom that the way children connect with their siblings is a very special and unique bond. I wanted to understand this bond more, along with trying to understand the huge impact losing that special person might have.

Arriving

Arriving at the initial topic of grief in children has felt a little like being dropped in the middle of Heidegger's forest (Heidegger, 1950), a forest I needed to cut my own path through, searching out what might be important, in order to fulfil the aim of my research.

My aim was to explore the question: "What can we understand about children's experience of grief following the loss of a sibling?" This is a subject that has often been overlooked, with these surviving siblings being referred to as invisible mourners ((Kempson & Murdock, 2010). This invisibility may be partly due to the distressing nature of a child's pain for adults. As I talked about the subject with my friends and peers, I quickly realised that the idea of researching the impact of a child dying was confronting for many people. It is a hard topic to think about and it is accompanied by painful, sometimes intolerable, emotions. As a psychotherapist I am trained to accompany people to the edge and to sit with people in the dark (Music 2019), so I feel well equipped to approach the research topic despite it being difficult. I hope that by walking the reader through my thoughts and the literature I can shine a light on these children's experiences, making them a little more visible. If bereaved siblings are more visible, they can get better support and this has the potential to mitigate some of the risks associated with surviving such a loss. I aim to highlight implications for best practice to support these children based on my findings.

Beginning

This project started through an initial wandering into grief, searching for images of what grief is and what it might feel like. I found myself surrounded by art images, photos and words from poems that tried to encapsulate what grief is. I used a journal process to write down ideas and thoughts that were triggered in me by these initial images and found these words (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Word cloud



One image (see Figure 2) stuck with me particularly strongly. It is an image that I kept coming back to throughout the research process and captures something for me about the disintegration caused by grief. It is an image of breakdown, an image that feels like the subject is in danger of being washed away by the power of her own distress.

Figure 2: *Broken*, (LaGelian, 2012)



Snapshot: Initial Literature Review

I conducted an initial scoping literature review in Google Scholar and APA PSYC NET using the key words: grief, siblings, and children. I scanned the most relevant results using the title and then the abstract to establish if the article might meet the criteria for this initial review. The inclusion criteria were any literature that was looking specifically at the child's experience of grief after losing a sibling. I limited my initial search to peer reviewed articles and also excluded those purely considering antenatal loss or the impact of the loss of a parent on the child. I also focused my search on articles published in the last twenty years. I scanned the titles and then the abstract to first decide if the article was relevant and then continued to scan the article to see if it was applicable to my search.

This initial review suggested that parents' experiences of losing a child have been thoroughly explored. Parental grief has been described as a deep terrifying sorrow (Stephens & Vredevelt, 2006) where they often feel robbed (Berk, 2010) and as if their whole universe has been thrown into disequilibrium. The loss of a child is recognised as one of the most traumatic experiences for any person (Bernstein et al., 1989).

There is some literature that considers surviving siblings. For example, McCowen and Davies (1995) found that these children are at increased risk of developing issues such as depression, difficulties at school, health concerns, and feelings of jealousy and guilt. More recently, Dickens (2014) noted surviving siblings often experience isolation as their parents process their own grief. This appears to put children at risk of developing further behavioural and developmental issues.

However, explorations of the experience of children themselves seem limited. This highlights a gap that exists for more research to be undertaken to explore, reflect on and highlight what these sometimes forgotten children might in fact be experiencing. It is challenging to find literature on this topic directly from the child's point of view. Therefore, I have widened my literature search to include other professionals working with children, such as paediatric psychology journals, child psychotherapy journals, palliative care journals, nursing journals, journals of critical care and death study journals. I have also drawn on the experiences of parents and included the viewpoint of adults who speak about their experience of sibling loss as a child.

Key Definitions

Grief

The APA dictionary (2015) defines grief as anguish experienced after loss. Grief is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as intense sorrow, caused by someone's death (Stevenson & Waite, 2011). Grief has also been explored as tangled with love, a manifestation of love and a consequence of love (Neimeyer et al., 2011). Further, Cacciatore (2017) describes grief as the process we go

through to become fully human. This dissertation will explore different ideas of what grief is, based on the idea that grief is the emotional response to the death of someone loved, in this case a sibling.

Child

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.a.) defines a child as a young person especially between infancy and puberty and implies that an adolescent is perhaps different to a child. However, the United Nations defines a child as a human being under the age of 18 (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and would therefore include adolescents. For the purposes of this research I will use child to refer to any person under the age of 18. A person under 18 can be considered not fully developed, either physically or emotionally, leaving them particularly vulnerable compared to an adult (Evans, 2012; Blanchet, 1996). It is this developmental difference in how the world is understood and perceived by children along with a recognition of their vulnerability, that is of particular interest in this piece of research.

Sibling

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.b.) defines a sibling as one of two or more individuals having one common parent. However this fails to capture the complexities of modern family life or different cultural definitions of sibling. For example, in some regions of Colombia, sibling refers to all members of the same tribe, not just those biologically connected (Circirelli, 1994), and in Māori culture every member of a genealogical generation is thought of as a sibling (Bernard, 1940). For the sake of this dissertation, I will take sibling to mean children sharing a parent, either biological, adopted or fostered. However, I acknowledge that the loss of anyone who feels like family, in the life of a child is hugely significant.

Overview of Chapters

In this first chapter I have discussed the origins of my research question and introduced who I am as a researcher. In chapter two I discuss my method and methodology exploring the epistemological foundations of the research and the research processes used to explore my question.

In the subsequent four chapters I have discussed the themes that emerged throughout the research. Chapter three explores children's understanding of death; chapter four explores how children experience grief; chapter five explores the significance of the sibling attachment; and chapter six explores healing. In the last chapter I bring together the findings from the research and discuss implications for practice and potential future directions for research.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have shared the experiences that have led me to an interest in exploring childhood grief following the death of a sibling. I have discussed the aim of my research, which is to increase awareness of how children experience grief, along with the hope of improving support to grieving families and minimising the risk of bereaved children developing psychological or behavioural issues. I have acknowledged my own background and values, so the reader can appreciate the subjective nature of this research. I have also outlined how I began my research process and summarised my findings from the initial literature review. I have given some definitions of the key terms that I have used in the initial search and given an outline of this dissertation, along with a chapter summary.

Chapter 2: Method and Methodology

In this chapter I will outline the philosophical foundations, methodology, method and research design of this dissertation and how this relates to my research question.

Method and Methodology

I have chosen to do a hermeneutic literature review exploring the question “What can we understand about children’s experience of grief following the loss of a sibling?”. This is a subject I feel personally drawn to, as well as believing that further understanding of the subject may help to improve clinical outcomes for grieving children. A hermeneutic approach aligns well with psychotherapeutic thinking, in that it invites us to look for a deeper understanding of the subject, while acknowledging that understanding continually unfolds (Gadamer, 2013). Hermeneutic philosophy also acknowledges that the understanding that we gain fundamentally impacts on the researcher themselves (Caputo, 2000; Gadamer, 2013), much in the same way that as a therapist, I am impacted by my work with clients. This process of growing and learning through experience, by reflecting on processes through journalling, contemplation and discussion with supervisors, allows for continual development and improvement in my therapeutic work. I hope that the hermeneutic process will encourage me to reflect on my initial interpretations of the research I find and give me the opportunity to deepen my understanding in much the same way.

Lost in the Dark

This title resonates with me as thinking about this project has often felt like fumbling in the dark with a torch. Then suddenly, it is not a torch, but a kaleidoscope and every time I look through it, what I see has changed, with different colours catching the light each time. It is a beautiful image but one that is constantly evolving. This feeling fits with the philosophy of hermeneutics, which acknowledges that reality changes and is sometimes difficult to grasp, like a cloud in the sky (Caputo, 1987). Caputo (1987) also thought that this struggle with the fluid nature of understanding resulted in humility. Perhaps it is that humility and willingness to wrestle with the material without

expecting to find a definitive answer that lays at the foundation of hermeneutics and this research. I have continued to look through the kaleidoscope, allowing myself to remain open to seeing something new, hoping that my understanding would continue to deepen, and that maybe I too would have the opportunity to evolve.

Methodology

This research has been guided by an interpretive paradigm using a phenomenological hermeneutic approach. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of being in the world (Neubauer et al., 2019). It seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon. In this case, I am exploring the experience of grief, from the point of view of children who have lost a sibling. However, first person accounts from children are uncommon. Therefore, I have built my understanding through a search for literature detailing childhood accounts where they can be found, along with the voice of adults speaking about their own childhood experience of sibling loss, parents in families where sibling loss with their own children occurred, and health professionals describing working with bereaved siblings.

Hermeneutic phenomenology originates from the work of Martin Heidegger (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). Heidegger developed the focus of phenomenology from being interested in the nature of knowledge, to being interested in the nature of being (Lavery, 2003). This focus on the nature of humanity aligns with the aim of trying to better understand children's grief and explore what it might feel like for a child to survive after losing a sibling. The interpretative paradigm with its emphasis on the subjective understanding of human nature was chosen, rather than a positivist approach, as this is not intended as an objective search for absolute truth, but rather a journey of curiosity about lived experience (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Orange, 2011).

A hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology, based on Heidegger's philosophy, accepts that the researcher brings with them their own previous experiences and personal worldviews, what Gadamer (2013) refers to as shadows. These shadows, or foreunderstandings, guide what the

researcher then values as knowledge (Giddings & Grant, 2002). As part of the hermeneutic process, the researcher endeavours to reflect on their reactions to readings and to consider pre-existing thought patterns that may be influencing the interpretations. The researcher does not seek to detach from the world they are researching, as might happen within a positivist paradigm (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). Instead, a hermeneutic interpretive approach recognises that reality is subjective and open to interpretation. The researcher is required to use a reflective process to evaluate their responses as they decipher the literature, allowing for deep consideration of a certain phenomenon, with the hope of enhancing understanding (Smith, 1999). This seems appropriate for a literature review hoping to enhance understanding of children's grief, especially given the lack of attention to this phenomenon in the literature.

A hermeneutic approach also aligns well with psychotherapy. Psychotherapy concerns itself with subjective interpretations of life and prioritises giving clients space to revisit and reinterpret their experiences (Barish 2018). For example, Winnicott (2005) describes transitional space in psychotherapy as the space where transformation and change might occur. He notes that without this space, without the room to play, it is hard to fully explore and understand ourselves. This is similar to the importance of the space between structure and freedom and the idea of staying open and in the play that Smythe et al (2008) discuss as central to hermeneutic research. Hermeneutic research encourages a search beyond what might be seen at first glance, which parallels the way a therapist is trained to see beyond the surface of what is merely being said.

Words Words Words

I was recently struck by a client repeating, "I have no words, I don't know" again and again in a session. This reminded me of how as a child psychotherapist I can work in a space beyond what is merely spoken. This is something that a hermeneutic research approach also embraces. As Caputo (1987) states, hermeneutics invites us "to keep the games in play," and to interpret the clouds in the sky without hope of ever being able to grasp or touch them, as they "pass through our fingers upon contact" (p.258).

In the search for an understanding of something as painful and complex as grief, a hermeneutic approach gives me the opportunity to look beyond words and turn towards art and poetry to try and understand what grief is, because written words may not be enough.

Method

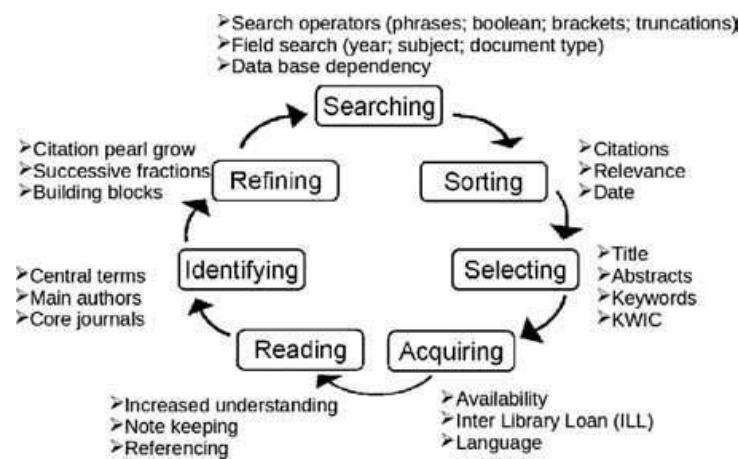
Hermeneutic Dialogue

The method for this dissertation was a hermeneutic literature review, exploring the phenomenon of grief in children who have lost a sibling. A systematic review was considered as it would have given a thorough overview, evaluating and synthesising the existing research on the topic (Dickenson 1999). However, a hermeneutic approach allowed more freedom to explore the topic as a whole, as well as the potential to focus deeply on areas with which I personally connected (Smythe et al 2008). This would not be possible with a systematic review as it requires a comprehensive review of all the material and also needs to be reproducible (Dickenson 1999). A hermeneutic approach recognises the individuality of the researcher and her unique insight into the chosen topic. Hermeneutics has allowed me to bring myself into the process, following connections I feel to the material and reflecting on how I am being impacted by the research (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014).

While it is acknowledged that hermeneutic research does not let itself be reduced to a methodical set of procedures (Van Manen, 2014), the concept of the hermeneutic circle (see Figure 3) as outlined by Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) has been used to guide this analysis, along with Austgard's (2012) steps. This means there is a credible structure to the process while also allowing space for play. Austgard's steps helped guide me towards understanding what I wanted to research and then distilling it down to what felt important. The steps include: working out the hermeneutic situation; identifying my fore-understanding; analysis through a hermeneutic dialogue with the text; and the fusion of horizons.

The initial step, working out the hermeneutic situation and acquiring a horizon of inquiry have been discussed both here and in the introduction and explore the background to choosing a methodology, arriving at the research question, and some explorations of my own fore understanding. Once the aim of the research was established and a question held lightly in mind, I began the next step of dialogue with the text. I used the hermeneutic circle of reviewing literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010) to guide me through this process. This allowed me to move in and out of the circle, re-viewing literature I had previously encountered with fresh eyes, until I reached a point where I was ready to transition to the final step of fusion of horizons (Austgard, 2012).

Figure 3: The hermeneutic circle of reviewing literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010, p.134)



Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were articles discussing the experiences of children who have lost a sibling, and their experiences of grief after that loss. I have therefore excluded articles that discussed the impact of parental loss for children. I also excluded articles that focused purely on describing behavioural changes in children as my interest was in understanding their lived experience rather than how to change problem behaviour. I excluded articles from before 2010 as I wanted to focus on recent research. I excluded articles that were not written in English, but have

referred to some of these that have been translated and I remained open to studies from other cultures. I scanned articles using the titles and then the abstracts to establish if I felt they met my criteria or not and sometimes read further to consider my own reactions to the material and if it felt relevant.

Data Collection

I began with a structured approach, conducting a literature search using APA Psych Net and Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP), to look for psychoanalytic peer reviewed texts published since 2010, exploring children's experience of grief following the loss of a sibling. Key words used were 'child', 'sibling' and 'grief'. I explored the texts and considered them against my inclusion criteria. I focused on five articles from psychoanalytic journals and then cast my search wider to include medical journals, psychology and counselling journals and death studies.

As I gathered different material together, I found myself being drawn to certain articles such as, Coombs, S. (2014). *Death wears a t-shirt: Listening to young people talk about death* and Halliwell & Franken (2016) "He Was Supposed to be With Me for the Rest of My Life: Meaning-Making in Bereaved Siblings' Online Stories". These articles had a strong child voice and gave me a sense of being able to connect with the child's experience through the writing. Heidegger (1976) encouraged this as part of the hermeneutic process, noting "What calls us wants to be thought about according to its nature. What calls on us to think, demands for itself that it be tended, cared for.... What calls on us to think gives us food for thought" (p.121).

I then used a process of "snowballing and citation tracking" (Boell and Cecez-Kekmanovic, 2014, p.269) to explore these topics further. Although I initially wanted to have a relatively structured framework, the research process seemed to be leading me in new directions. Romanyshyn (2020) discusses how research has moments of falling apart, taking unexpected twists and turns and essentially falling out of the hands of researcher into something more organic and I wanted to remain open to where this process would lead me.

The hermeneutic process requires the researcher to engage in a dialogue with the research (Spence, 2001), so as I read I noticed my understanding evolve and I allowed myself to be inspired by photos, or art or poetry. I made notes on what I was reading and reflected on feelings that were triggered and thoughts that evolved out of the material. Smythe and Spence (2008) suggest this is an important part of the process, along with a willingness to be surprised.

Reflecting on the initial collection of data I found some ideas emerging but felt that I needed to expand my search to gain a more thorough understanding. I repeated my search in Google scholar, in the hope of capturing previously unconsidered resources. I broadened my search criteria, and this led me to medical journals that explored health professionals' opinions on working with bereaved children and included peer reviewed articles from nursing journals, death studies and palliative care journals.

A hermeneutic exploration is not intended to be exhaustive (Boell and Cecez-Kekmanovic, 2014) so rather than try and do an extensive search of all the available material, I decided to focus on key articles to which I was particularly drawn. This process is something that Gadamer (2013), believed led to deeper understanding.

Sökandet: The Search for Meaning

Hermeneutics demands a conversation with the text, it demands that the researcher be present and open to thinking (Smythe et al. 2008). This is an iterative process that allows for analysis throughout the study. However when I felt I had hit a point of saturation in my gathering and reading phase, I paused to give more focus to analysis. Gadamer (2013) saw the hermeneutic dialogue as a reflective act where “the mind hurries...and seeks the perfect expression of its thoughts through inquiry and thoughtfulness” (p.425). I felt this sense of rushing as I gathered material so wanted to give myself space to slow things down. I identified recurring themes in the literature, themes that jumped out of the readings and demanded my attention. I then used a Google image search to find art or imagery that captured the essence of grief. Initially I used the same

search criteria as I used for the literature but I then widened this by adding some of the key themes that had been identified, such as isolation and loneliness.

I played a slideshow of the images that I had found and wrote down feelings and words that came to mind. I also searched for poetry that tried to capture the essence of what grief was, again using the same search criteria.

I kept coming back to the image of Azula (Figure 2) and the sense of losing oneself in grief, of being washed away into nothingness. There were moments in the research process where I also felt myself getting lost, so I used my research diary as a tether, grounding me and reminding me of where I have come from and about the aim of the research. This tethering process helped me exclude articles that may have been interesting but not directly connected to this particular project.

I used what Heron (1996) refers to as a Dionysian inquiry, using an imaginal, expressive spiralling and impromptu approach, rather than a more rational, linear Apollonian method (Heron, 1996). This allowed me to consider themes deeply and may have also revealed aspects of grief that would have remained hidden if the search was a purely systematic review.

I acknowledge that because this is not a systematic review, some material may have been missed, however this is consistent with a hermeneutic approach. A potential limitation of this research is that it presents my perspective on the phenomenon of childhood grief rather than a definitive analysis of the topic. There is also strength in the subjectivity of my findings because they offer a unique perspective and are founded on the deep personal contemplation that accompanies hermeneutic research (Gadamer, 2013).

Fusion of Horizons

The hermeneutic process can feel like there is no end, a spiral that keeps circling. Indeed, the nonlinear journey of the research seems to echo the grief process itself (Lewis 1961; Torbic, 2011). One minute I felt myself moving forward, the next minute I found myself back at the centre of the spiral. This constant re-engagement with the material ensured an ongoing conversation and a

journey into deep contemplative thinking, which kept the research aligned with hermeneutic philosophy and ensured more robust findings (Koch, 1995; Spence, 2017).

However, I did reach a point where ideas and themes became clearer and more robust and this is where I paused. This step, Austgard's (2012) fusion of horizons, is where I began to weave these ideas together, in a discussion of what was found. I collated pictures, poems and themes from readings together and considered how the different ideas might connect with my fore-understandings of children's grief.

My hope for this exploration is that it will increase understanding of childhood grief and perhaps inspire others to continue further research into the topic. "The work that is finished is never done" (Romanyshyn, 2020, p.262) and I acknowledge that were I to look again and review the material gathered further, I would be likely to see different images through the ever turning kaleidoscope.

Ethics

Ethical research obligations have been considered throughout the research process. I have endeavoured to conduct my research with sensitivity and respect to those involved in the original material, which I feel is particularly important when difficult and deeply personal experiences are being described. I have also used my personal and professional supports to help me navigate some of the more intense emotions that the research has triggered in me through dealing with such a difficult subject as the loss of a child. I have reflected on any particularly intense responses through journaling and conversation with my supervisors. The impact and significance of the research has also been considered and I have attempted to keep my writing respectful of different cultural viewpoints on grief and loss. I acknowledge that my own cultural viewpoint is European and as such this research is written from a European worldview. I believe that further research through a Kaupapa Māori lens would be invaluable when considering grief and loss in children.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the phenomenological foundations this study is based on and explained my approach using a hermeneutic methodological framework that aligns well with my research question related to exploring grief in siblings. The methods used for data collection and review have been outlined along with processes used for analysis of the material and some ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Findings: Understanding Death

“On the horizon, he saw the full moon. God dropped it there, he was sure, as a reminder that what is beautiful is fleeting.” (Sherwood, 2004, p.13)

My research question explored the question “what are children’s experiences of grief in response to the death of a sibling?”. This chapter provides an overview of some key concepts I discovered in the literature relating to children’s understanding of death itself as these understandings determine the manner in which children grieve. I have grouped these findings into three headings: the universal nature of death; the unique perspective of a child; and the difficulty of speaking about death. This will then lead to a deeper analysis of how children process death and grieve the loss of a sibling.

A Universal Experience

“For all the points of the compass, there’s only one direction. And time is its only measure.” (Stoppard, p.51)

Death happens, eventually to all of us. Indeed, it is a universal experience. Heidegger (1962) believed we are already dying and argued that the possibility of no existence is a constant threat. As a result of this the connections we make are always shadowed with the fear of loss (Heidegger 1962). The finitude of life, it would appear, permeates everything, whether we want to see it or not. Derrida (2001) argued that relationships are tinged with the knowledge that one of you will see the other die. He goes on to explain that in death we not only lose a life but also a person through whom we may have seen the world for the first time, opening up opportunities, giving the world meaning. The way we experience the people in our lives becomes linked to our sense of self and in the aftermath of loss our entire understanding of who we are and the world we live in needs to be re-configured. For children, who still have an emerging sense of self, the loss of someone as integral to their being as a sibling is shattering (Packman et al., 2006).

The traumatic loss that can be associated with death destroys our emotional world and leaves us feeling eradicated (Stolorow, 2013). However, there is also hope to be found, as we are “brothers and sisters in the same dark night” (Vogel, 1994, p.97). The power of connection with others allows the possibility of what Winnicott (2005) would refer to as a holding environment. This is a place where catastrophic emotional pain can be contained, processed and eventually integrated, through emotional attunement with others (Stolorow, 2013). Even if our relationships are tinged with knowing that connections will be broken, it is through that very connection that we become stronger and eventually can begin to heal. Perhaps we are all just walking each other home (Dass & Bush, 2018), but there is magic in not having to take that journey alone.

A Child’s Perspective

“She wore...a white T-shirt which read in dark letters: I am your dearest wish I am your worst nightmare (Blackman, 2007, pp.90–91).

For children, understanding death and loss can be complicated by their different developmental stages, limiting how they are able to make sense of death. Heidegger (1962) may have believed that we are born knowing we will die but for a young child death is a difficult concept to fully grasp (Schonfeld, 1993). Children are not usually able to fully comprehend death until the age of 7-9, (Schonfeld, 1993). For children to fully understand death, there are four main concepts that need to be accepted: universality, irreversibility, non-functionality and causality (Wass, 1984; Smilansky, 1987).

Children under the age of five tend not to understand death. They may confuse it with sleep expecting people to wake up, or to come home, not understanding death’s permanence (Schonfeld, 1993; Stein et al, 2019). They are attuned to their caregivers however, often picking up on distress and noticing the absence of close family members (Stein et al, 2019). In order for children to begin to process the loss of someone, permanence and irreversibility need to be understood, so that children can establish new ways of continuing bonds with the deceased (Schonfeld, 1993). Young children often fail to comprehend the universality of death too as they often believe that their

immediate family are impervious to harm (Reynolds et al., 1995; Machajewski & Kronk, 2013).

This idea is played out in the novel: *Bridge to Terabithia*¹: "Leslie could not die any more than he himself could die" (Patterson, 1977, p.106). This is an acknowledgement that perhaps there is an innocence in childhood that is protective against seeing seemingly unbearable truths.

Older children from five upwards begin to get a deeper understanding of death, realising that it is universal. However they may still believe that even in death, the person can continue to function. They may wonder what the deceased person might be doing now (Safier, 1964; Wass, 1984). They may also ask questions, such as, can the person still hear them, why are they not talking to them, or they might wonder things such as whether the birds who fly close to heaven might eat the person (Cain et al., 1964).

It is also difficult for children to understand causality, as comprehension of key biological concepts does not generally occur until after the age of seven. Children of this age are also in what Fraiberg (1950) describes as the magic years, where children have a sense of omnipotence, believing they are responsible for certain events as a result of their own thoughts. This combination of beliefs and lack of understanding can lead to children feeling responsible for death (Schonfeld, 1991; Stein et al., 2019). This is seen in Jessie's reaction to Lesley dying when he blames himself for her death in *Bridge to Terabithia* (Patterson, 1977).

After this initial discovery of how children's understanding of death progresses developmentally, I found myself looking further for children's thoughts and ideas about death. In the article "Death wears a T-shirt" (Coombs, 2014) I came across the idea that for young people death might need to be relatable and personified. Death might be a teenage girl, someone who can walk with you to the next adventure (Blackman, 2007). This is perhaps a reflection of the idea that one of the most terrifying elements to death is the notion of doing it alone (Schonfeld, 1993). In addition, teenage

¹ In the story of *Bridge to Terabithia* Jesse and Leslie form a very special and close connection, much like siblings. They create an imaginary world where they can seek refuge from the harsh realities of daily life. This is shattered when a tragedy occurs and the depths of grief that follow are explored through Jesse's voice. Jesse's experience, while fictional feels relevant here because it gives another insight into how people might perceive childhood grief.

literature and other media often portray a strong idea that love can conquer death. “Twilight is all about love and death, and that love conquers everything, even death” (Coombs, 2014, p.290). While teenagers may developmentally understand all of the previously mentioned aspects of death, there seems to still be a hope that there is something that can combat death’s inevitability, or that there is some way to give it meaning: “Laura: (aged 15) I’d like to die exploding in the air to save the world like Peter Petrelli” (Coombs, 2014, p.293).

Children have a different understanding of the world than adults but their experiences are nevertheless deeply held and felt. In order to help children to understand something as confronting as death, it is essential that we take the time to step into their shoes and try to see the world as they see it, so we can fully support them in the way they need. This ensures that children are not left alone with their distress.

Speaking the Unspeakable

“The garden we create for the innocent must be more perfect than God’s: a walled garden, with no snakes and no fruit.” (Faulkner, 2011, p.8-9)

Death is hard for many people to talk about, because when we do we are faced with the reality of what Heidegger (1962) claimed we already knew, that this will all end. To talk about death with children then becomes even more troubling. Surely, children should be protected from the harsh realities of the world, their innocence protected? In Western philosophy, based on Christianity, the idea of loss of innocence, is deeply connected to the concept of original sin and an indelible stain of guilt (Faulkner, 2011). This contributes to the difficulty many adults have with the concept of childhood innocence being breached. In Western European culture, the idea that, “Children do not think about death. Children cannot think about death. Children should not think about death” (Kastenbaum & Fox, 2007, p.123) has been the dominant assumption, with childhood portrayed as an “idealised and timeless place of perfect harmony” (Taylor, 2011, p.420). This concept of needing to protect children is however, now being challenged with recent research indicating that talking openly with children about death creates more positive outcomes (Horsley & Patterson, 2006).

Death is actually always present as part of children's lives (Higgins, 1999; Silverman, 2000; Coombs, 2014). Pretending that childhood is a place void of all distress ignores the child's reality. Such pretence leads to an externalizing of their thoughts and fears and may result in children becoming afraid. If the child is not able to talk about these fears and externalize them, then they are left to manage these intense emotions alone (Higgins 1999, Yalom 2008, Silverman 2000).

This is the opposite of what children need. Rather, research in child development shows that children's capacity to regulate emotions develops over time and it is not developed in isolation (Winnicott, 2005; Schore, 2021). Children need an adult mind capable of mentalising for them, helping them to process and understand confusing emotions (Fonagy, 2004). This co-regulation – or feeling with and alongside - helps them develop the skills to make sense of what they are experiencing (Fishbane, 2007). If we do not talk openly about death with children they are left alone with thoughts and emotions they do not have the capacity to make sense of. This is more likely to lead to complicated emotional and behavioural issues, as a result of internalising or projecting their fears, as the child tries to develop survival mechanisms (Sanghvi, 2020).

The concept of the idealised innocence of childhood that must be protected from horror such as death is flawed. If we take the time to consider the child's reality and listen to the child's voice we can see that they are already part of the reality we are trying to hide from them and perhaps “the importance of innocence has little to do with their welfare, and a great deal to do with adults' discomfort in the world” (Faulkner, 2011, p.18).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a brief overview of some of the key concepts I have encountered concerning death. It includes an exploration of a child's perspective of death and considers some of the psychological and developmental processes involved in understanding dying. It also briefly considers why adults find death such a hard topic to talk about with children.

Chapter 4: Understanding Grief

“Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime, and falling in at night.” (Macdougall, 1972, p.102)

This research aims to increase awareness of how children experience grief. Initially, I looked for answers in academic articles but as I read deeper into these I felt frustrated. These articles often took a behavioural perspective and saw the manifestations of grief as something to be fixed rather than as an appropriate expression of profound loss. The articles did not capture the rich essence of the experience of grief, so I turned to poetry, literature and art, to try and grasp what grief feels like for a child in a different way. This chapter describes the experiences I encountered and relates these findings to understanding how children may experience that grief. I am writing this chapter in the recent aftermath of my own mother having died. This makes the writing experience especially difficult and painful and also a visceral bodily experience. My own grief is so powerful, it heightens my sense of the enormity of navigating the loss of a sibling for a child.

A Neutron Star

The more I read the more I considered the power of grief. As I journaled and let myself reflect I wondered about the impact, the sheer force and the weight of grief. It felt like something otherworldly, like swallowing a neutron star (Rosemerry, 2019). Grief is crushing exhaustion, a sense of being consumed from within by something so heavy it is impossible to conceive prior to it actually happening (Schuelke et al., 2021; Gerhardt, 2020). It is desolation (Gerhardt, 2020).

Unimaginable Loneliness

*“Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.”
(Merwin, 1993, p.15)*

Heidegger described anxiety as a sense of “not-being-at-home” (Heidegger, 1927, p.233) and this can also be relevant to grief. After the loss of someone special, especially in the case of a sibling, there is a sense of not belonging to the world anymore: “No matter where I am, I feel

unsettled” (Torbic, 2011, p.70). The world carries on but no longer feels like home, something Stolorow & Atwood (1992) describe as “the unbearable embeddedness of being”(p.22). In the aftermath of a traumatic event, such as the loss of a sibling, the bereaved person becomes aware of experiences that lie beyond the horizons of normality and a “deep chasm in which an anguished sense of estrangement and solitude takes form” opens up (Stolorow, 2007, p.467).

Grief can be isolating and fill the bearer with an intense loneliness (Schuelke et al., 2021). Stolorow (2007) describes the experience as unfathomable, as if the bereaved person now inhabits an altogether different world. Similarly, Salberg (2017) describes a feeling of not just being lost “but terrorized by lostness” (p.77). This is something unimaginable, even for many adults, but for children who are still developing emotional maturity, to be lost in such a way, would feel unbearable (Halliwell & Franken 2016).

Gerhardt (2020), describes grief as something that keeps the mourner deadened and haunted. It is as if the bereaved person’s sense of self has fractured. They have not only lost a connection to someone they love but also to themselves. She goes on to compare this to what Winnicott (2005) describes as falling forever and Bick (1968) describes as falling to pieces: a state of agony when emotions must be experienced alone, without a holding containing mother. This sense of isolation was echoed in my image search. The art I found conjured images of anguish, solitude and deep loneliness.

For bereaved siblings this sense of isolation is compounded by the fact that they may also feel as if they have lost their family. Their parents may be consumed with their own grief and therefore emotionally unavailable (Applebaum & Burns, 1991). According to Stephens and Vredevelt (2006) grieving parents “feel like they are losing their minds” (p.64). This deep sorrow can leave surviving siblings feeling like outsiders in their own families (Cain et al., 2012). Surviving siblings can be forgotten in the wave of pain and grief that washes through the family system, leaving them feeling invisible (Torbic, 2011; Nolbris, et al., 2005; Cain, 2012). If children have to endure these intense

and most painful of human wounds (Nouwen, 1972) alone, their ability to process these emotions and continue to make sense of the world is severely compromised.

Connecting Circuits

“Man is truly altered by the co-existence of other men; his faculties cannot be developed in himself alone, and only himself” (Coleridge, 1977, p.299)

It is very difficult for a child to be left in an isolated state and cut off from connection. Children need positive relational experiences to support them to feel a sense of vitality and aliveness (Schoore, 2021; Stern, 2010; Trevarthen & Friesen, 2015; Winnicott, 1965). Healing after trauma can only occur through supportive human relationships something Scheinkman & Fishbane (2004) describe as “laying new neurological cable” (p.296). Our experiences shape our brains, altering connections among neurons (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). While the impact of trauma and loss can negatively impact the brain, relationships can heal or ameliorate this impact. Schoore (2021) discusses the significance of relational exchanges stating that they result in neurobiological energetic shifts in consciousness and Barish (2018) talks specifically about children, stating the “most important cells and enzymes in a child’s emotional immune system are supportive family relationships.” (p.31).

The risk for surviving siblings who have already lost their physical connection with their brother or sister is losing connections to parents, friends and a world they feel they no longer belong in. As Fonagy (2018) states: “Adversity becomes traumatic when it is compounded by a sense that one’s mind is alone” (Slide 7). Cozolino (2006) consolidates this, noting, “The individual neuron or single human brain does not exist in nature. Without mutually stimulating interactions, people and neurons wither and die” (p.11). The importance of connection for all of us and especially children is clear. It highlights that even in the most traumatic heartbreaking moments, healing can occur, through feeling seen and understood, and feeling connected to the essence of what makes us human (Solms, 2018). Children need to have someone alongside them in the darkest times, to support them until they find the spark that invites them to connect with the experience of being alive in the world again (Ogden, 2001).

Playing Football

“Grief is like football. Sometimes you feel you can run forever. Other times you get tackled out of nowhere.” (Torbic, 2011, p.68)

Grief in children and adolescents does not follow the same pattern as grief in adults (Nolbris et al., 2005; Brown et al., 20). Grief is too heavy and intense for children to hold all at once and they need to take pauses. Some experts describe this as jumping in and out of deep grief puddles, compared to the adult experience of being in a raging river (Gao & Slaven, 2017). Children need to continue to experience the aspects of life that make them feel themselves again. This may look as if children are not affected by the loss because they can continue to be with friends and laugh and play, but this is a child’s developmentally appropriate way of beginning to process what has happened (Cain et al., 2012; Noppe & Noppe, 2004; Giovanola, 2005; Nolbris et al., 2005). Wolfelt (2003) describes children’s grief as a fierce storm at sea but goes on to say that when children are supported to experience their feelings, they can learn to anchor themselves in that storm and the healing process of integrating these emotions can begin.

Portkeys to Trauma

*“Slowly, almost imperceptibly,
a cloud begins to darken
...her running points me back
to other partings
and toward other turnings
further down the road.”
(Stolorow, 2003, p.227)*

Children may re-experience grief throughout their lifetime, especially in the case of a lost sibling. This is because a sibling is expected to accompany them through their lives, being alongside them for all life’s challenges (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). Grief will often make a reappearance when important events or milestones are met and the pain of not having the sibling alongside intensifies. Fondly remembered moments may quickly turn into what Storolow (2011) refers to as portkeys to trauma, suddenly transporting the bereaved back to a dark place in their past, where they are left adrift in a world emptied of light, contemplating impossible milestones and

futures that will never be known. The portkeys will always be there, bringing back treasured memories sharp and jagged, like pieces of a broken cup, etched with the heaviness of lost futures. These intense emotions can however, be tolerated if they can be contained through the help of an understanding other, through which the loss can be integrated (Stolorow, 2011). Children gain a deeper understanding of their loss as they transition through developmental stages but it can be a painful experience. They will re-encounter portkeys that drag them backwards to a place where intense emotions have to be re-processed with a new and deeper understanding (McGlauffin, 1990; Willis, 2002).

Spiralling

“In grief, nothing ‘stays put.’ ...it always recurs. Round and round...Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral?” (Lewis, p.56)

My experience of this research has felt like a spiral, coming back to similar ideas but with a deeper understanding the more I circle back to the articles I have read before. It is as if the hermeneutic spiral is echoing the grief spiral, where intense emotions fade a little but then return to be re-processed with the smallest trigger (The Highmark Caring Place, 2010). It sometimes feels as if there is no way forward. This is not the beginning though. The river I stand in is no longer the same river and I am not the same [wo]man (Khan, 1981).

Grief can be like a spiral for children too (Torbic, 2011). Being on the spiral gives them the opportunity to circle back to their loss and re-process some of the emotions connected with it. They can do this indirectly through play, giving them the chance to process intense emotions in a way that is manageable and without the need for complicated language (Wolfet, 2003; Torbic, 2011; Willis, 2002). This also allows them to manage their emotions at their own pace, in bite size pieces.

The way that children grieve is different from the experience of an adult and this can make it difficult for adults to understand and support children (Nolbris & Hellstrom, 2005). It is therefore important to try and see the world as the child sees it and to give them support to process grief in

their own way, which may mean spiralling and coming back to it over and over again. As Storlow (2014, p.82) explains:

“When we dwell with others’ unendurable pain, their shattered emotional worlds are enabled to shine ...Emotional pain and existential vulnerability that find a hospitable relational home can be seamlessly and constitutively integrated into whom one experiences oneself as being”.

Fear

“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.” (Lewis, p.19)

Storlow (2007) discusses a “catastrophic loss of innocence that permanently alters one’s sense of Being-in-the- world” (p.213), following a traumatic event such as having a sibling die. This statement captures the essence of what children lose when they are exposed to early trauma. A deep-seated sense of fear develops as they realise, prematurely, that the world is not a safe place (Torbic, 2011). Traumatic loss creates rippling shockwaves, impacting all the lives it touches (Schuelke et al., 2021). These shockwaves can create existential anxiety that impacts functioning as everything children thought they knew about the world is brought into question. Yalom (2002) recognises, “From the beginning of written thought humans have realized that everything fades, that we fear the fading, and that we must find a way to live despite the fear” (p.125). For adults living with fear is possible, for children who have a limited understanding of their emotions this is very difficult.

Children fear the unknown and have vivid imaginations that can create dark fantasies which are often worse than the truth adults are trying to protect them from: “When facing death, they are confronted with a monster without a face and are not articulate enough to express those inner emotions that may consume them if not released.” (Dickens, 2014, p.125). Naming the fear and being able to talk to children to help them to make sense of what they are experiencing can be hugely beneficial but is never easy. There is often a strong inclination to expel the pain rather than containing it (Waddell, 2002) and this can lead to behavioural difficulties in children when they do not get help to process and understand their fears.

In psychotherapy we are trained to have the “courage and the ability to escort people into dark, uncomfortable place” (Music, 2019, p.5). We hope that by doing so we can help our clients to process and understand their emotions and help make the unthinkable thinkable (Bion, 1964). Without this containment, primitive fears of annihilation (Klein, 1946) can be projected onto others or float as a nameless dread (Bion, 1964). Children need to feel safe to share their darkest worries with a caring and empathetic adult. Someone who gives them the strength to know that those fears can in fact be survived (Music, 2019) and who can lead them through the emotional minefield, clearing safe paths for them to move forward (Schuelke et al., 2021; Dickens, 2014).

Shards and Splinters

If something broke in our house when my daughter was little, we would have to keep a piece. She would hold a tiny shard in her hand and ask to keep it somewhere safe. The broken object was gone but part of it remained, a memory, stored with care, the edges sharp and jagged, tinged with regret, tinged with sadness. For me at this time, grief feels sharp and jagged, and it feels unbearable to leave it behind.

I am reminded, though, of the Japanese art of Kintsugi whereby broken objects are repaired with gold. Once shattered a thing can never be the same but it can still be beautiful. We don't have to let go of loss or grief. However, we can grow around it and allow it to be carried like gold threads, interwoven into life. Integrating grief, or growing around grief, can serve as a reminder of love. It is this integration that can rebuild the shattered sense of self, whole again but now woven with threads of gold.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has brought together the ideas I encountered on children's experiences of grief. I found myself immersed in my own grief the more I read. I used the idea of the hermeneutic spiral to bring me back to previous ideas until I could distil it down to a few key elements to which I kept

returning. It includes what grief feels like and what might be different for children as well as considering some key ideas about how to support children in their grief.

Chapter 5: Understanding Siblings

“If you have a sister and she dies, do you stop saying you have one? Or are you always a sister, even when the other half of the equation is gone?” (Picoult, 2004, p.136).

This chapter provides a discussion of research specific to the sibling relationship and considers how this special bond impacts the experience of grieving. Once again, I found myself looking beyond my original search in academic articles. I again turned to different sources such as art, literature and poetry. This helped me to grasp an understanding of the uniqueness of the sibling connection beyond what academic papers were revealing. It helped me to truly feel, in an embodied way, why the sibling relationship is so incredibly special. I have also reflected on my own sibling relationship as a way of deepening my understanding.

Connected

*“We played
so we could fall asleep
in the same bed
without having to ask,
so we could wrap together
like a braid,
so while we slept
our dreams could switch bodies.”
(Nelson, 2010, p.275)*

Scanning through a Google image search for photos of siblings I was struck by the idea of connection. I was seeing photos of people who look similar, have similar body language and seem to be sharing important life experiences over and over again. No-one was alone. As I reflected on the essence of the photos, I felt a deep sense of security and a sense of belonging. The people in these photos seem to know who they are and where they belong. They expect to have someone with them on their journey through life’s challenges and they smile and laugh and cry in the photos, all the time with someone by their side. They see a reflection of themselves, looking back with similar echoes of love and anger and sadness painted across their expressions. They are deeply connected.

The sibling relationship is intrinsically tied to the past, present and the future (Whaley, 2012). It is often the most consistent relationship through a person’s lifetime and is expected to continue into

late adulthood (Milevsky, 2016; Cicirelli, 1995). Siblings expect to live alongside each other through life's major events and developmental milestones (Dickens, 2014). As such, this relationship has a huge influence (Tay et al., 2021). It is often a complicated relationship with intense emotions of love but also perhaps hate or jealousy. Siblings might be close friends or even enemies but they remain connected, tied to each other throughout their lives, often making it one of the most intimate relationship in a lifetime (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). The sibling relationship can also provide protective factors such as increased psychological wellbeing, emotional maturity and development of both social skills and cognitive abilities (DeLarco, 2022). The stability provided by the sibling relationship can also fulfil an emotional need when parental or peer relationships become strained (Bank & Khan, 1982; Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Stocker, 1994). It is also an important factor in development and socialisation (Foster et al., 2011). When we consider all these protective factors it becomes clear that the loss of a sibling would have a hugely significant and ongoing impact on the surviving child.

I would not have described myself as having a close sibling connection but in my own recent experience of grief I have been deeply grateful to have my sibling there. They were someone who understood it all without the need for lengthy explanations, someone I could be with, where words were not necessary. Sometimes words fail but we always want to feel understood. The shared life experience that comes with having a sibling goes some way to ensuring that you never feel alone. The idea of losing that, even now as an adult, is devastating.

Isolated

“Not only had my brother disappeared, but...a part of my very being had gone with him. Stories about us could, from then on, be told from only one perspective. Memories could be told but not shared” (Whaley, 2012, p.175).

Grief creates fractures and breaks connections. It fosters loneliness as previously discussed in chapter two. However, the depth of isolation experienced by those who have lost a sibling goes even further. If we consider the expected trajectory of our lives, losing our siblings as children is not something that should happen (Patterson & Horsley, 2006). A traumatic event like this pierces

the ego defences and confirms pre-existing existential anxieties connected to the death instinct (Garland, 2002). Freud (1920) described trauma as piercing the protective envelope of the mind, leaving it exposed and at risk and Garland (2002) describes it as a foreign body that continues to be at work long after the initial impact. The child's world is torn apart after a trauma such as losing a sibling, and it is no longer a safe place. The surviving sibling is left to learn to navigate a new reality, often isolated as a result of the change in family dynamics and the impact of parental grief.

Winnicott (2005) talks about the importance of children having a person, who acts as a mirror to reflect back to them for the emotional development of the child. If there is no reflection, chaos and fears of annihilation quickly arise. Winnicott (2005) states "if the mother's face is unresponsive, then a mirror is a thing to be looked at but not to be looked into" (p113). It follows that as we develop we learn and begin to understand ourselves through seeing ourselves in relationship with others (Bowlby, 1973; Wright, 2009; Fonagy, 2004). Hood (2014) explores the idea that a sibling can sometimes act as that mirror or lens through which we see ourselves and our childhoods. Therefore, Packman et al. (2006) and the futures that were tied up with that part of their identity. "It's as if someone vacuumed up the horizon while we were looking the other way" (Nelson, 2010, p.22).

The loss of a sibling impacts the surviving child on so many levels, but it is perhaps the isolation that is most heartbreaking (Kawamura et al., 2021). Rather than seeing their self reflected back to them through the loving eyes of a sibling, they are instead facing an abyss, their own emptiness reflected back. This is something Winnicott (2005) recognised as challenging: "Wouldn't it be awful if the child looked into the mirror and saw nothing!" (p.116). This is too much for a child to process on their own and results in the brain circuits being flooded with raw emotions (Freud, 1920; Rass, 2017; Prior, 2004), something they ultimately need support with to process. Withdrawing from a world that is overloaded with intense emotions and filled with hurt can be protective in the short term, but long term isolation ultimately prevents the possibility of growth and healing (Prior, 2004).

Responsible

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Genesis 4:9

Siblings can often feel responsible for each other, perhaps sensing an unwritten obligation to keep each other safe, to protect the other from harm. This can lead to the surviving sibling feeling a sense of guilt and shame (Funk, 2015). This is especially true if there were strong feelings of jealousy or anger towards the deceased sibling (Green, 1978), both of which are common after a period of time where needs have gone unmet, and the focus has been on the sick sibling. In some cases siblings may have harboured fantasies about the other sibling dying. “As we got older, I didn’t seem to exist, except in relation to her...I would count the ways. Poison...a wicked undertow at the beach...lightning striking...” (Picoult, 2004, p.3). This can lead to them wondering if their thoughts were somehow connected to the events that followed (Schonfeld, 1993; Stein et al., 2019) and increasing those feelings of guilt and shame. Siblings can often feel resentful of the time and focus given to the sick sibling and this may continue after death if the parents are consumed with grief and do not shift their focus back to the surviving sibling (Patterson & Horsley, 2006). It is also possible for the surviving sibling to feel a sense of relief after the death and this can lead back to feelings of guilt and questioning if they are somehow responsible. (Dickens, 2014)

If the environment the child is living in is filled with parental feelings of anger, sadness and frustration as a result of the bereavement, those feelings can also be introjected (Prior, 2004). This means the trust in the strength of the child’s good internal objects weakens and the power of bad internal objects intensifies (Garland, 2002). In other words, the child might begin to believe that they are the problem, they are not good enough, and perhaps somehow to blame. This again can amplify feelings of responsibility, guilt and ultimately self loathing. It is essential that children get support to help them through some of these fundamentally normal feelings without being pathologised. They can then hopefully move towards a place of understanding and healing.

Enduring

“My sister will die over and over again for the rest of my life. Grief is forever. It doesn't go away; it becomes part of you, step for step, breath for breath...That's just how it is. Grief and love are conjoined, you don't get one without the other.” (Nelson, 2010, p.443)

The impact of the loss of a sibling on a child is huge and it is a weight they carry for the rest of their lives. They must face future horizons that will continually remind them their person is not alongside them, and major milestones are forever tinged with the sadness of absence (Dickens, 2014). However, grief is not something to be put down and moved on from, but instead something to build a new life around, a life intrinsically woven with threads of memories, simultaneously both painful and beautiful (Bank & Kahn, 1982). The power of continuing bonds with the deceased has been shown to be incredibly therapeutic and healing (Packman et al., 2006). A life may have ended but the relationship can continue in a meaningful way (Bank & Kahn, 1982).

Prior (2004) states that integration is one of the keys to healing trauma and this is applicable to the experience of grief. The lost sibling can be honoured and remembered and continue to have a presence in the lives of those left behind. Sadler (2007) and Te Pou (2010) state that this integration occurs through genuine connection with others who can truly grasp your experience along with a continuing connection with the deceased. In the case of the traumatic death of a sibling, connection is one of the most significant things that has been lost. Finding ways to build new connections on a different level can be profoundly therapeutic and move towards healing (Packman et al., 2006). For example, deceased siblings can sometimes be perceived as a felt presence, someone that can be talked to and confided in, and they can be honoured in ongoing rituals and can even be thought to influence future decisions. This meaning finding can be comforting and may even deepen the connection to the deceased sibling (Packman et al., 2006). If the deceased child can somehow be woven into the fabric of the family, a part of everything despite being absent, a powerful ongoing relationship that transcends the limits of physical connections can develop (Côté-Arsenault, 2003).

“Isn't it possible that, even thirty or forty years after the death ...one may half waken, thinking of that person with the same lost emptiness, that feeling of places which may never be filled.” (King, 2017, p.454)

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the significance of the sibling bond. It has explored some of the key ways that sibling bereavement might be different to other types of loss and how children might experience losing such a vital connection. It has also explored the importance of continuing bonds.

Chapter 6: Discussion

“There’s no way to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: Words fail” (Lacan, 1990, p.3)

In this dissertation I have carried out a hermeneutic literature review to answer the question: What can we understand about children’s experience of grief following the loss of a sibling? I began by exploring a selection of peer reviewed scientific articles and then used a snowballing technique to follow a pathway into the hermeneutic spiral that incorporated a diverse range of journals and also fiction, poetry and art. I have engaged thoroughly with this topic gaining insights into how the death of a child has profound effects on surviving siblings. In this final chapter I discuss the main findings and reflect on my process. I also consider the implications of my findings for future research and for psychotherapy.

Summary of Findings

*“You just have to stand up to your fear and not let it squeeze you white.”
(Patterson, 1977, p.126)*

My findings show that death can be hard for adults to think about, harder for them to talk about and even harder still to talk to children about. The research shows that facing the your fear and being open to hearing what children have to share and sitting alongside them in their fears, is what ultimately helps children to understand that their intense emotions might actually be survivable (Music, 2019).

The findings show that children understand the concept of death differently to adults. Their experience of what death means will depend on their developmental stage and their life experiences so far (Schonfeld, 1993; Stein et al., 2019). Children do think about death and dying and the adult preconception that the concept of death is something to protect children from seems to be misguided (Schonfeld, 1993; Faulkner, 2011). It seems that honest and open communication is key to feeling safe and supported when dealing with difficult emotional subjects (Sanghvi, 2020). This raises the question of the motivation behind our resistance to talking to children about death.

Perhaps, it is not that we are trying to protect them but that we as adults are afraid and are trying to

protect ourselves (Faulkner, 2011). The research shows that children need to be supported in a way that is best for them, considering their developmental understanding and their unique emotional needs.

My findings highlight that grief is not something we move on from. Rather, it is something that stays with the bereaved like a knotted ball of string that has been swallowed, a black dog constantly at your heels or a shard of glass sharp to touch at first but gradually dulling over time. It is something to be woven into the fabric of who you are going forward (Côté-Arsenault, 2003).

Further, children do grieve when they lose someone close to them but the way that grief is experienced is different from adults. In the past this has led to people believing that children were unaffected by the bereavement or too young to understand. In reality, children move in and out of grief, processing what they can manage in small puddles of emotion rather than the stormy sea that might be equated with an adult experience (Gao & Slaven, 2017). Children re-experience their grief as they grow older. New developmental stages deepen their understanding of death and bring their grief to the surface as they step into new life stages without their loved one. Children feel loss deeply and profoundly, but it impacts them differently and they need supportive adults to help them to process it (Wolfelt, 2003). It is important that people supporting children understand their grief experiences are so different.

My findings show that the sibling relationship is deep and enduring, and the loss of such a unique and special relationship early in life can have long lasting impacts on the surviving sibling. Previous research has focused on the adult experience of the loss of a child describing it as deeply terrifying and traumatic (Stephens & Vredevelt, 2006; Bernstein et al., 1989) with little focus on the experience of the surviving siblings. However, siblings are deeply affected and continue to be impacted throughout their lifetime. If they are able to tell their stories, connect meaningfully with others and integrate the memory of their sibling, this can be healing and therapeutic (Wolfelt, 2003).

Children need a safe and containing relationship, someone to help them feel seen (Barish, 2018). This is particularly important in the context of having lost a sibling, who may have previously held this role. Parental grief often limits the ability of the parents to provide this for surviving children. In this case, it is vital that surviving siblings are able to access additional support from outside the immediate family if needed. “People feel valued just by having someone listen to their story” (Stevenson, 2018, p.231).

There is often an interweaving of grief and trauma following the loss of a child. The death of a child is always traumatic as it shocks against the natural order of how things should be, shattering our understanding of the safety of the world as a whole (Prior, 2004). The aftermath of trauma can be extremely difficult to navigate but healing can be found through authentic connection with others who truly grasp the essence of the experience (Wright, 2009; Fonagy, 2004). Ensuring children have a safe place where they can express the full extent of their complex emotions in a way that is meaningful to them is hugely important (Cain et al., 2012).

My findings support the need for at least one supportive and emotionally available adult to help the child to jump in and out of the puddles of grief at their own pace. This then helps support them to process and integrate strong feelings they do not have the maturity to make sense of alone (Wolfet, 2003; Willis, 2002). It also decreases the chances of the development of complicated grief and problematic behaviours. If children can be supported to experience their grief, letting the rain of emotions wash over them, they may be spared the pain of trying to achieve the impossible task of controlling the sun.

*“Heaven would tell you that it’s just a little rain.
And it’s not the rain that kills you,
it’s the pain of wanting to control the sun.”
(Shaffer, 2014, p.156)*

Implications: Working with Children and Families

*“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o’er-fraught heart and bids it break.”
(Shakespeare, 1914, p.150)*

Hermeneutic research offers the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of a topic from a unique perspective and invites the reader to explore previously unconsidered ideas and ways of thinking (Tasker et al., 2014). This particular research invites the reader to reflect on their own thoughts and experiences of working with children who are experiencing grief and encourages the type of reflexivity that is important in developing good practice.

This research highlights the importance of including specific information on the impact of grief in training programmes for professionals intending to work with children. It also highlights the intensity of working with grieving families and therefore demonstrates the need for good support for the professionals supporting those families.

The research shows the value of being alongside children in their darkest times and sitting with them in the dark for as long as they need (Freud, 1916). This is something that as therapists we are expected to have the courage to do (Music, 2019), but can at times be incredibly difficult, especially when there is no quick fix for the client. My hope is that the research shines a light on the value and importance of giving children the chance to feel known and understood, which is an essential part of psychotherapy (Barish, 2018). Psychotherapists are taught to “respect the inevitable complexity of psychological suffering, the uniqueness of each patient...the value of a stance of not knowing” (McWilliams, 2013, p.921).

My findings show that grief is not a problem to be fixed, but rather something that children need support with to process and integrate. It demonstrates the need for bereaved children to be offered psychological support, such as psychotherapy to help them process their experiences. I hope that increased awareness of the impact of grief on children might mean more children can access that support.

Psychotherapy provides a model that can offer good support to grieving families as it gives children the space to explore their emotions safely, at their own pace. Using a play therapy space gives them the opportunity to express themselves either directly or indirectly without becoming too overloaded by the intensity of emotions they do not have the capacity to process all at once. The

unique nature of each situation and experience can be acknowledged and support can be given that gives families the strength to know that the pain they are experiencing can be tolerated.

This research has the potential to empower more therapists to feel confident to work with children and families navigating their way through these very difficult situations, hopefully ensuring that access to therapy is possible for those who want it. It might also help to make the experience of grief in children more visible, so that families and the communities around them can gain a better understanding of the child's experience and surviving siblings can be offered more support.

This research may also support medical professionals to have conversations with families about death and dying. Clear, open communication and information about the grief process have been shown to alleviate distress and decrease the risk of developmental and behaviour issues as a result of grief (Wiener et al., 2013; Lövgren et al., 2016). Realising it is not your responsibility to fix the situation and allowing the child to lead at their own pace also helps to facilitate healing (Torbic, 2011).

My hope is that this research will contribute to empowering both medical professionals and families to feel confident approaching difficult conversations about grief and loss. The confidence to approach these difficult conversations also provides a gateway to establishing what extra support a family might need. Resources might include sibling specific information, support groups, grief camps, parenting groups or one to one therapeutic support (Barrera et al., 2018). Access to this important information may make a difference to the child's developmental trajectory and minimise risk of developing complicated behavioural or psychological issues (Cordaro et al., 2012).

Implications: Me

“If you cannot bear the silence and the darkness, do not go there; if you dislike black night and yawning chasms, never make them your profession... Seek out the sunshine. It is a simple prescription. Avoid the darkness.” (Eiseley, 1971, p.15)

It is tempting to seek out the sunshine but difficult feelings are embedded in my work as a psychotherapist and this research has given me the opportunity to delve deeply into something important to me.

Accessing different resources to try and gain a sense of understanding of childhood grief has been therapeutic. As I have journeyed through my own recent grief, connecting with art, poetry and literature that captures a sense of the turmoil that grief brings, has helped me to feel like I am not alone. I have experienced hope that maybe the gaping chasm that grief creates, the disconnect from people, even from reality, can be bridged.

Smythe and Spence (2012) describe knowing as an embodied experience, something that grows from experience. This research has been confronting and difficult, but I feel I have experienced a faded echo of what grief may feel like for children. In doing so I have enhanced my knowledge and understanding and also my capacity to sit with and hold that pain in my work as a psychotherapist. Experiencing the world in its wholeness might be essential to our wellbeing and a fundamental part of being human (Wright, 2009; Fonagy, 2004), but it is an incredibly hard thing to navigate. This research has given me the opportunity to develop both personally and professionally.

Strengths and Limitations

“You have to work. Did you think you could snap your fingers and have it as a gift?” (Pullman, 2000, p.523).

This research has offered the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of how children experience grief after the loss of a sibling. It may be considered limited as it is not a controlled, replicable, empirical study as you might expect from research within a positivist framework. However, this deeply personal and subjective qualitative research invites the reader on the journey with me. It has strength in that it offers the possibility of unexpected revelations, deep understanding and even personal transformation (Etherington, 2017).

There is also strength in the use of an ad hoc, Dionysian approach (Heron, 1996) as it has enabled me to follow my inclining towards material I was drawn towards (Smythe & Spence, 2012)

and incorporate fiction and poetry in the hope that a more subtle and nuanced understanding can be reached (Grünbein, 2010). The choice of a hermeneutic methodology challenges the assumption that empirical knowledge is the only knowledge and moves away from a devaluing of alternative ways of knowing (Green, 2020). This feels hugely important in a world where the voice of the child can easily be forgotten or overlooked.

While this research offers a unique perspective, a limitation of using such a personal approach is that another researcher may have uncovered different relevant material that was outside of the scope of what I was drawn to explore. Another major limitation is that while I was often interested in research from cultures other than my own, I made a choice to focus on a predominantly European perspective and in doing so have not considered how cultural difference impacts the grief process.

The strength of this research lies in the invitation to ask questions and to consider different perspectives. It does not seek an ultimate conclusion but instead invites the reader to do the work, the thinking and hopefully challenges their existing ways of knowing (Caputo 1987, Smythe and Spence, 2012).

Future Directions

I feel optimistic for a future where the experience of children is more widely acknowledged and supported. I have touched on the child's need to feel heard and to tell their story. It would be great to see further research looking into the importance of speaking directly with children about end of life. It would also be helpful to explore the significance of the roles of extended family members and the community in providing siblings with extra support (Alderfer et al., 2010). In addition, future work may consider the influence of cultural, spiritual and religious beliefs or traditions on the grieving process, which may help to inform future interventions. Future research conducted through a Kaupapa Māori lens would be hugely beneficial and may bring with it a new perspective that can inform care and support for all grieving children.

Final Reflections

“Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.” (Rabindranath Tagore)

Children feel the pain of loss and they experience grief in their own way. As much as we might want to keep them in the light of the sun, they experience the darkness. Rather than try and protect them from the dark, we should be prepared to walk with them and stay alongside them, giving them our strength and our trust that the light will return.

We cannot, nor should we try to, cut ourselves off from the whole range of the human experience. Our ability to feel the depths of grief, to feel pain and loss and loneliness may well be a quintessential part of what makes us human. This is no different for children, however they need to be supported to do this in their own unique way.

For adults to face these intense emotions ourselves is hard, to walk alongside children as they face the dark is terrifying and overwhelming.

I have found myself wanting to stay in the sun: resisting, avoiding and ignoring the pain but this is why I am here. I recognise the chasm that grief creates and how isolating it is, how painful it is to sit in the dark alone and how genuine connection heals.

*“I am fixed to my chair, afraid
to move, to rove, to attempt
to walk through their pain. How
can I exempt myself from their suffering—
isn't this why I came?”
(Ellsworth-Moran 2022)*

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