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# Losing Andrew: Disenfranchised Grief in Shelly Wagner's Poetry

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## Introduction

On first glance, grief seems easy to define: it is simply the sadness or sorrow caused by someone's death. People who have experienced grief know how difficult it can be. Those who have seen others grieving can imagine the challenges that come with it (Shear & Shair, 2005). But it is this feeling of universality, this 'easy-to-define-ness', that makes grief controversial. Despite its universal nature and the proliferation of literature which examines it, there is considerable evidence that the 'concept of grief is plagued by vagueness and ambiguity' (Cowles & Rodgers, 1991, p. 119).

Over the last fifty years, grief has been defined as an adaptational response to changing environmental conditions (Bowlby, 1973), a state of mind which mimics disease (Engel, 1961; Stroebe, 2015), an acute crisis where there is no immediate solution (Caplan, 1974) and as a syndrome with psychological symptoms (Lindemann, 1963; Parkes 1972). In addition to these varying definitions, grief has also been characterised by both scholars and medical professionals as a group of recognisable symptoms, including 'shock or numbness, overwhelming sadness, tiredness or exhaustion, anger and guilt' (Bugen, 1977; *Coping with bereavement - Live Well - NHS Choice*, 2016; Cowles & Rodgers, 1991). However, even among those who propose or agree that grief is simply a combination of symptoms, opinions differ in relation to how and when these symptoms manifest themselves (Dempsey, 1975; Lynch, 1977; Osterweis & Townsend, 1988; Werner-Beland 1980; Worden, 2009).

With such an extensive discussion of 'normal grief' in scholarly literature, it is no surprise that more complex grief has also sparked debate. In particular, this applies to disenfranchised grief, which is arguably one of the most challenging grief experiences to manage (Corr, 1999). In his 1989 essential text, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*, Kenneth Doka defines disenfranchised grief as 'the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported' (p. 4). He suggested that disenfranchisement can apply to certain types of deaths, like those which occurred through suicide, domestic violence and addiction (Doka, 1989). In addition, Doka suggests that grief can be disenfranchised when the loss, the relationship or the griever is not recognised by society (Doka, 1989).

This paper seeks to enhance the understanding of disenfranchised grief in relation to its expression through poetry, in particular in Shelly Wagner's collection, *The Andrew Poems*. To accomplish this, I will review the primary ways in which grief can be disenfranchised as outlined by Kenneth Doka in 1989 and Charles Corr in 1999. Thereafter, my inquiry will be guided by the following question: How does Shelly Wagner's grief experience, as told through her poems, reflect or challenge the concept of disenfranchised grief? Responding to this question may help to enrich my own understanding of Doka and Corr's ideas as well as bereavement in general. More specifically, analysing Wagner's poetry may also highlight or reveal ways in which to assist other grievers who feel their experiences have been disenfranchised.

## Disenfranchised Deaths with Doka

Doka's explanation of disenfranchised grief centres on the idea that certain types of deaths are inherently disenfranchised because of how society in general 'feels' about them (Doka, 1989, p. 7). This disenfranchisement occurs when those who have died are 'blamed' by society for their deaths – like drug addicts who could have gotten clean or domestic violence victims who could have left their abuser (Doka, 1989, p. 7). He also suggested that suicide, death from AIDS or other stigmatized diseases, mutilating deaths and executions would be categorised as 'disenfranchised deaths' (Doka, 1989, p. 7).

Doka suggests that our society is repelled by these types of death because 'their complexities are not well understood or because they are associated with a high degree of social stigma' (Doka, 1989, p. 7). As a result, the character of the death seems to disenfranchise the grieving process that comes after it. For instance, grievors may not receive the comfort, empathy or support they seek after losing someone to a disenfranchised death because their friends, family or co-workers stigmatise it or do not understand it (Doka, 1989; Corr 1999). Due to this stigma and/or lack of understanding, the griever may find it difficult to talk about their loss. This can cause or exacerbate feelings of 'guilt, shame and blame as well as countless other feelings that cause a griever to hide their grief, feeling the death is not worthy of the same grief based on societal rules' (Attig, 2004, p.200). As a consequence of this, those who are grieving over disenfranchised deaths often feel a sense of isolation not experienced by 'normal' grievors (Doka, 1989, p. 7).

## Further Disenfranchisement with Corr

Kenneth Doka laid the foundation for the study of disenfranchised grief, pointing out that disenfranchisement can apply to the type of death as well as any or all of the key structural elements in grief, including relationships, losses, and grievors. Ten years later, Charles Corr (1999) built on this in his article, 'Enhancing the Concept of Disenfranchised Grief', by exploring three key elements of disenfranchised grief not touched on by Doka. Before doing this however, he highlights the difference between grief and bereavement, stating that:

Doka is clearly correct in recognising that disenfranchisement can apply to relationships, losses and grievors. These are, in fact three key *structural elements* that definite the meaning of the term "bereavement." Thus, what Doka has really defined is 'disenfranchised bereavement' ...that is the objective situation of one who has experienced a significant loss. (1999, 6-7)

Corr notes that this minor adjustment does not mean that Doka is incorrect – and in fact, disenfranchised grief is the coined term for what Doka discusses – but that he would like to 'enhance or enlarge the concept of disenfranchised grief by examining it critically in relationship to the dynamic components of the bereavement experience' (Corr, 1999, p. 8). To this end, Corr expands the 'scope of understanding of what can be disenfranchised beyond aspects of bereavement' by discussing grief reactions and their expression, mourning, and the outcomes of grieving/mourning (Attig, 2004, p. 200).

## Grief Reactions

According to Corr, grief reactions can be disenfranchised when the griever is told that the feelings, thoughts or behaviours that come over them as they react to a death are inappropriate (Corr, 1999, p. 8). He suggests that reactions to loss are disenfranchised when they are not, in whole or in part, 'recognized, legitimated, or supported by society' (p. 8). Corr explains that this can be seen when a grieving person is told:

"You shouldn't feel that way"; "Don't think those thoughts"; "Don't say those things (about God, or the doctor, or the person who caused the death)"; "You shouldn't act like that just because someone you loved died." Sometimes any reaction is judged to be inappropriate; in other circumstances, some reactions are accepted while others are rejected. (p. 8)

In addition to the disenfranchisement of grief reactions and their expression, Corr notes that mourning can also be disenfranchised. On a basic level this means that the efforts one makes to 'cope with loss and grief in mourning are frequently not understood for what they are and thus are not valued by society' (Corr, 1999, p. 11). In his book, *Bereavement: Studies of grief in adult life*, Colin Parkes provides an excellent example of this, stating that disenfranchised mourning can occur when a griever is told not to do something that he or she feels is useful; for instance, the griever may be told 'not to go over the details of the death again and again, as if such filling in of the stark outlines of a death is not an essential part of the process of realization or making real in one's internal, psychic world what is already real in the external, objective world' (Parkes, 1996, p. 211).

Finally, Corr notes that the outcomes of grieving or mourning can be disenfranchised when others respond negatively to mourners (Corr, 2004, p. 12). This can occur when outsiders feel that the griever is 'taking too long with their mourning, fail to return to "normal" or move on, persistently hurt, are slow to take up new relationships, or maintain a relationship with the deceased' (Corr, 1999, p. 14-16).

## Understanding Disenfranchised Grief

Through their key texts, Doka and Corr are able to explore the situations in which disenfranchised grief can arise but only touch on why understanding this type of grief matters. Doka observes that the very nature of disenfranchised grief 'creates additional problems of grief, while removing or minimizing sources of support' (Doka, 1989, p. 17). Corr also notes that disenfranchised grief raises additional issues which go beyond the difficulties associated with 'normal' grief because it typically:

involves intensified emotional reactions (for example, anger, guilt, or powerlessness), ambivalent relationships (as in some cases of abortion or some associations between ex-spouses), and concurrent crises (such as those involving legal and financial problems). In circumstances of disenfranchised grief there is an absence of customary sources of support because society's attitudes make unavailable factors that usually facilitate mourning (for instance, the existence of funeral rituals or possibilities for helping to take part in such rituals) and opportunities to obtain assistance from others (for example, by speaking about

the loss, receiving expressions of sympathy, taking time off from work, or finding solace within a religious tradition). (1999, 4-5)

Clearly, both researchers believe that the issues associated with disenfranchised grief deserve attention. According to Corr, an 'empathetic society should not formally or informally accept the beliefs, values, or behaviours that communicate inappropriate or unjustified messages to a bereaved person', such as:

"Your relationship with the deceased person did not count in our eyes"; "Your loss was not really a significant one"; "You are not a person who should be grieving this loss"; "We do not recognize some aspects of your grief" or "Your grief is not acceptable to us in some ways"; "Your grief is in itself a symptom of psychic disorder or lack of mental health"; "Your mourning has lasted too long"; "You are mourning in ways that are publicly or socially unacceptable"; "You should not continue to mourn inside yourself in these ways"; or "Your mourning should be finished and over with by now." (Corr, 1999, p. 17)

These societal messages, whether said or implied, carry weight for those who are bereaved and serve to make the personal grieving process more difficult and isolating (Corr, 1999, p. 17).

### **Disenfranchisement in *The Andrew Poems***

With an understanding of disenfranchised grief as discussed in the texts above, we can now turn to the question posed in the introduction: Does Shelly Wagner's grief experience, as told through her poems, reflect or challenge the concept of disenfranchised grief? This autobiographical poetry collection follows Wagner's grief after her five-year-old son, Andrew, accidentally drowns in the river behind her Virginia home. She mourns his loss by withdrawing, packing away Andrew's things, gardening and writing. *The Andrew Poems* explore what she was going through, highlighting key elements of disenfranchised grief along the way. In particular, Wagner expands on Doka's definition of disenfranchised death by exploring the particular disenfranchisement that occurs in the wake of a child's accidental death. Her poetry also clearly reflects the disenfranchisement she experiences, at the hands of her family and friends, in relation to her own mourning.

### **Disenfranchisement of Accidental Death**

Both Doka and Corr discuss how accidental deaths can be considered disenfranchised, providing examples of homicide, drowning and fatal allergic reactions (Doka, 1989; Corr, 1999). They note that accidental deaths can also bring unwelcome blame – said or implied – to griever who were charged with 'protecting' or 'recognising' the risk to the deceased, particularly if it was a child (Doka, 1989; Corr, 1999). While communities do mourn the death of children as tragic, there is a strong societal agreement that no child should die before their parents, particularly when the death is preventable or 'accidental' (Doka, 1989; Corr, 1999; Rogers, Floyd, Seltzer, Greenberg & Hong, 2008). Like other disenfranchised deaths, sudden deaths are often more difficult to grieve than expected deaths since they usually leave survivors with feelings of guilt, a belief the death is not 'natural' and a sense of 'unreality about the loss' (Corr, 1999; Doka, 1989; Parkes, 1975; Worden, 2009). This can clearly be seen in Shelly Wagner's poem 'The Boxes', which describes what it was like when the police were

called to find Andrew (1999, p. 10-11). She describes searching all the boxes in the house for him, his brother Thomas looking through neighbour's garages (1999, p. 10-11). In her final stanza, Wagner writes:

...I still visit the cemetery,  
not as often,  
but the urge is the same:  
to lie down in the grass,  
put my arm around the hump of ground  
and tell you, "Get out of this box!  
Put a stop to this commotion. Come home.  
You should be in bed." (39-46)

Wagner creates a landscape here which suggests 'unreality, absence, but which redistribution/scarring registers a very particular reality, a specificity of place in time' (McGowan, 2004, p. 40). Here, Wagner names the cemetery as a place she continues to visit, the hump on the ground as inviting, the coffin as a box like so many of the ones Andrew used to hide in. She reveals that her urge is to speak to Andrew in the way that she would have when he was alive, heightening the juxtaposition between her wishes and reality.

This sense of denial and of 'unreality' is explored further in her poem 'The Limousine' (p.16), where she details the experience of pulling away from the cemetery after Andrew's burial. She writes:

...The world looked like an old black-and-white movie  
I couldn't recall.  
People stopped to watch the limousine pass.  
Perhaps some glimpsed  
the woman's face  
framed in the window.  
Could they see this portrait of a mother  
she would live for years  
enclosed in this long, black car? (16-22)

Researchers note that disenfranchised deaths, particularly sudden deaths, usually 'slow down time', causing the griever to feel 'numb' and stuck in a 'daze' following the death (Corr, 1999; Doka, 1989; Parkes, 1975; Worden, 2009). This can be seen most evidently in the narrative of 'The Limousine'. Wagner explains that the world has changed, become like 'an old black-and-white movie' and suggests that she might 'live for years' in this limousine (p. 11). This sense of numbness can also be examined in terms her use of pronouns. There is a shift in perspective from the beginning of the poem, which is written in first person, to the end of the poem, quoted here, which uses the third person and refers to her objectively as 'a mother' (p. 11).

According to Campbell and Pennebaker (2003) in their article, 'The Secret Life of Pronouns: Flexibility in Writing Style and Physical Health', choosing pronouns in expressive writing is significant as they

reflect the interrelationships between the author and the people who are being written about. They state that:

Pronoun choice is based on perspective. For example, 'us and them' betrays a very different perspective than 'you and them' by highlighting whether the author is identified with a group, and which one. Virtually all the traumatic experiences that were written about in our studies were ultimately social, and this is not coincidental...Coming to terms with a traumatic experience appears to be linked to thinking about oneself in relation to others (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003, 64).

By switching from first person to third person pronouns, Wagner not only creates a sense of 'unreality' for readers but confirms her numbness, taking herself out of the situation as if she were just a character in her own life. Following Campbell & Pennebaker's logic, it could also be argued that by situating herself as the 'portrait of a mother', Wagner begins thinking about herself in relation to others (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003, p. 64). In this role as the 'portrait mother' we can see Wagner being observed by others in passing, as though she is not herself and they cannot or do not recognise her, or who she once was, as they pass. This creates distance between herself and what is happening, mimicking the numbness she feels and suggesting that she is in denial about her loss (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003).

Later in her collection, Wagner's poetry begins to explore the feelings of guilt caused by her disenfranchised grief. In the case of accidental death, particularly of a young child, there is often 'a strong sense of guilt expressed in "if only" statements such as "If only I had been with him."' (Worden, 2009, p. 188). Although Wagner does not use these 'if only' statements directly in her poems, she writes poignantly about the river, sometimes discussing what happened, what she would have done or suggesting alternative realities. This can be seen first in 'Thomas' Birthday', where she explains that Andrew was buried on Saturday and his brother, Thomas, had a birthday celebration on Sunday (p. 17). Towards the end of the poem, Wagner remembers watching Thomas blow out the candles and then being consumed by an imagined scenario:

...Suddenly it seemed the three of us were alone  
in our backyard:  
me lying on the ground –  
another drowning victim,  
Thomas kneeling over me  
covering my mouth with his,  
steadily blowing into me,  
and you,  
pacing back and forth on the water,  
crying to him,  
"Save her! Save her!" (43-53)

This piece reflects her feelings of guilt at not being in a position to save Andrew herself. She wishes that she was with him in the end, putting Andrew in the position that she 'should' have been in: the

person crying out to save him, getting help. These lines can also be read as a sacrificial imagining where Wagner's guilt is causing her to offer up herself to be in Andrew's place.

In later poems, Wagner attempts to comfort herself and quiet her guilt. This can be seen particularly well in 'Home', where she writes:

I lie down  
beside the bulkhead,  
pull the river up  
around my ears  
and listen  
to the crabs tell me  
how natural he looked,  
how peaceful,  
as though he were only sleeping (16-24)

These lines suggest that Wagner found comfort in imagining that Andrew found some peace in the river, that his death was not as bad as she thought. In some small way, this belief could help alleviate her guilt around his death.

In addition to the guilt which is peppered throughout her poetry, Wagner also explores her feelings about being an inadequate mother, someone who is partially responsible for Andrew's death. This need to blame oneself for what has happened, or feel that they are being blamed by others, is a common feature in disenfranchised grief (Corr, 1999; Doka, 1989; McClowry, Davies, May, Kulenkamp, & Martinson, 1987; Parkes, 1975; Worden, 2009). This can be seen particularly well in 'Foxes', where Wagner wears two fox scarfs she bought at a vintage shop to a café after Andrew's death (p. 57). In her final stanza, after seeing the disgusted response the waitress had to the foxes around her neck, Wagner writes:

Does this woman think  
I could have killed these babies next to me?  
I would have opened the trap,  
freed them.  
Does anyone think it was my fault –  
Andrew drowning?  
I wasn't there  
to free him from the river  
and carry him back to the house  
as I carry these two littles ones  
in my arms  
out of the restaurant and home. (30-42)

Here, Wagner explicitly writes about the worry she has about others blaming her for Andrew's death. She also hints to the guilt she feels, and the blame that she places on herself, for not being there to carry him back home from the river (Wagner, 1994, p. 57).



## Disenfranchised Mourning

In addition to exploring the disenfranchisement involved in losing a child to accidental death, Wagner also reflects on the disenfranchisement she experiences in relation to her mourning, otherwise known as the 'adaptation to loss' (Worden, 2009, p. 39). This can be seen in the advice or questions she receives from family and friends. For instance, in two poems her mother disenfranchises her mourning. This is first mentioned in 'Dust' (p. 38), where Wagner notes that her mother:

...does not find humorous  
the notes I leave at night  
written in all capitals  
on dark table tops,  
"DUST ME."  
"You cannot live like this," she says,  
but I don't mind the company of dust. (7-14)

Later, in 'My Work' (p. 80), Wagner writes:

It's a beautiful day, but I am depressed.  
My mother says, "Don't just sit there,  
do something constructive."  
She would vacuum.  
I'll do laundry. I'll gather my poems –  
those too tear-stained  
and sticky with sentimentality –  
and wash them. (1-7)

Both pieces suggest that her mother does not approve or recognise the way in which her daughter is choosing to mourn. According to Charles Corr (1999), the way in which mourning is most often disenfranchised is when the bereaved person is:

advised that the proper way to manage a loss is simply to "put it behind you" or "get beyond it." This assumes that one can simply hop over a stressful event in life, ignore the unwelcome interruption, and go on living without being affected by what happens. (p. 11)

In Wagner's case, her mother frequently says that she should not be sad or depressed, that she should get up and move forward with her life. This is seen similarly in the way Wagner's older son, Thomas, speaks to her throughout the collection. For instance, in 'A Happy Poem' (p. 75), Wagner writes:

Thomas asks, "Why  
don't you write a happy poem?  
Can you write one about your rose garden?"

Because of Thomas, I won't say  
the garden is the size and shape  
of our family plot at the cemetery  
or that the metal markers  
resemble grey granite tombstones,  
the roses' names in all capitals. (1-9)

Although Wagner recognises later that Thomas is not intentionally trying to stop her from grieving, she still feels the need to hide her mourning process from him, which in part includes writing poems about Andrew's death and her grief.

Later Wagner recognises how Andrew's death has significantly changed the relationship with her family. In the piece, 'To My Parents' (p. 71) she writes:

They live without their youngest grandson,  
but how do they live with me?  
At night, I go into their bedroom  
as I did as their little girl [...]  
The role of parent or child  
in our family  
is as fluid as the river  
that killed one of us.  
It is how  
we have survived. (44-47, 69-74)

Finally, in her longest piece, 'Your Questions' (p. 61), Wagner bucks against the opinions and questions she receives from her friends and family members. She takes on an authoritative tone in her first stanza, addressing those around her:

I'll tell you;  
I'll be bold.  
You cannot know what this is like.  
I don't want you to know  
first hand.  
But do not dare surmise  
or worse, pass judgement –  
you'll hear a different poem from me. (1-7)

She carries this forward in the second stanza, stating:

My face shines like Moses's face  
and I refuse to hide it anymore,  
cover it with makeup  
or put on a smile  
to make it easier for you.

Do not avoid my eyes.  
Do not walk away from me.  
I am a mother.  
Come close, sit down  
and listen. (56-65)

These lines reflect Corr's assertion that many people in contemporary society are 'unwilling to take part in the public or interpersonal rituals or mourning...[due to] a discomfort with public ritual and open expression of strong feelings' (Corr, 1999, p. 11). When mourning is disenfranchised in this way, grievors can become angry and resentful of those around them, which the quoted lines from Wagner reflect (Corr, 1999; Doka, 1989, Attig, 2004; Worden, 2009).

Later in this poem, Wagner begins to reveal some of the questions or pieces of advice she received as she mourned the death of her son. In her third stanza, she writes:

For words of comfort even now,  
you might say and some did say,  
"You still have another son."  
Now I ask you,  
"Do you hear your logic?  
When your mother died  
did your living father make it easier?" (96-103)

In a later stanza, she notes that the questions have stopped but:

...you are concerned.  
You suggest I get out and get some exercise.  
Exercise!?! Exercise!?!  
Grief is isometric.  
Are you looking at my face?  
I have the face of a sprinter. (245-251)

As a whole this piece suggests that Wagner does not feel her mourning is being respected. Robert Neimeyer and Jack Jordan have identified this, along with other types of disenfranchisement, as a form of 'empathetic failure' (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). In their chapter, 'Disenfranchisement as empathetic failure: Grief therapy and the co-construction of meaning', they note that the disenfranchisement of grief and mourning occurs when those around the bereaved fail to appreciate 'the gravity of what has happened or the resulting anguish and loss of meaning in the mourner's life. It fails to appreciate what he or she is going through, and as such is hurtful and destructive' (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

...Fear of loss  
and walls of self-protection

will kill me  
long before a broken heart.  
I pray,  
let every death  
break me so. (Wagner, 'I Thirst', 11-17)

Although grief is considered a universal experience, there is still much to learn about how individuals grieve and how loved ones and society in general interact with the grieving process. The discussion of disenfranchised grief reviewed here opens a window, giving readers an opportunity to see into a world of complicated loss that they might not yet, or ever need to, inhabit.

At the beginning of this paper I posed a question: How does Shelly Wagner's grief experience, as told through her poems, reflect or challenge the concept of disenfranchised grief? In short, it both reflects and challenges. Her poetry reveals that she has experienced many of the difficulties scholars have associated with disenfranchised grief, including numbness, denial, guilt, anger, resentment and more (Dempsey, 1975; Doka, 1989; Corr, 1999; Lynch, 1977; Osterweis & Townsend, 1988; Werner-Beland 1980; Worden, 2009). But she goes deeper than this. Her clear images and concise language go further than the research. She expands on the definition of what it means to deal with disenfranchised grief after the accidental death of a child – a concept only briefly touched on by Doka and Corr – by examining the situations and emotions she experienced after the loss. Later, she reflects on how her mourning was disenfranchised by those around her, asking questions and giving 'advice'. Through the act of crafting these experiences into poetry Wagner does something the scholars never could: she makes us *feel* them. And, this is the crux of it. Corr states that a caring society should

respect the complexities and the individuality of each bereavement experience...a caring society and its members ought to appreciate that healthy grief honors cherished relationships and that constructive mourning is essential for those who are striving to live in productive and meaningful ways in the aftermath of loss (1999, p. 17-18).

Similarly, Neimeyer and Jordan encourage us to speak and listen, write and read, be understanding of one another in order to correct our society's empathetic failure when it comes to disenfranchised grief (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002).

There is much more to discuss here than this limited paper can allow, so this is only the beginning: one poet and one experience of disenfranchised grief. But there are many more poets with many more disenfranchised grief experiences, including Rebecca Goss, Anne Sexton, Dannie Abse, Pascale Petit, Sharon Olds, Christopher Reid, Chanel Brenner and Renalto Rosaldo, to name a few. It is in the pages of collections written by these and other poets that we can begin to deepen the discussion of disenfranchised grief. By analysing the poetry of those who have experienced disenfranchised grief, I believe we can learn more about what is under the surface. Poetry provides more than medical symptoms and broad-brush feelings. It has the ability to focus on the subtle force of grief, the implication, what lies underneath. It has an uncanny way of saying unsaid things. By further analysing Wager, and poets like her, we stand to gain invaluable insight into what it means to

experience disenfranchised grief and how we, as a society, can be better equipped to support those going through it.

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