Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief and its Association with Social Connectedness Among Mothers of Differently Abled Children

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between witnessing disenfranchised grief and social connectedness among Indian mothers of differently abled children who had experienced complicated deliveries or miscarriages. Employing a correlational research design and regression analysis with a purposive sample of 39 mothers, this study utilized the Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief Scale and the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised. The results indicated a moderate positive correlation between witnessing disenfranchised grief and social connectedness ($r = .470$, $p < .01$). Regression analysis revealed that witnessing disenfranchised grief significantly predicted social connectedness, accounting for 22% of the variance ($\beta = .305$, SE $= .094$, $t = 3.236$, $p = .003$). These findings suggest that when mothers perceive that their grief is related to raising a differently abled child, as acknowledged by others, they report stronger social bonds. However, the limited variance explained highlights the influence of other factors on social connectedness. The implications of these findings underscore the importance of validating these mothers' unique grief experiences in fostering social engagement and enhancing their well-being.

Keywords: psychological well-being, social functioning, community participation, maternal welfare, social behaviour

1 Introduction

The phenomenon that is now termed grief is as common to humanity as is pain but it is unique in that is defined and accepted depending on the cultural-social setting it is in. Some types of loss are easily understood and people are encouraged to grieve them, for instance the loss of a dear one through death, but there are those that are not easily recognized and if anyone grieves they are told there is nothing to grieve about. Kenneth Doka in 1989 developed the idea of disenfranchised grief as grief that is not acknowledged, encouraged or socially shared. People suffering from disenfranchised grief do not get to receive the kind of sympathy that is given to them during the time of bereavement. This lack of recognition can deepen feelings of suffering, and make one feel lonely, invisible, and emotionally abandoned. These are some of the losses that may be discounting, misunderstood or socially taboo such as miscarriage, pet loss or suicide of a loved one.

A group of people who are most vulnerable to experiences of disenfranchised grief are mothers of children with disabilities. It is a modern form of grief that these mothers suffer from and is known as ambiguous loss, which occurs when the individual is psychologically absent from the physical body. According to

Lang et al. (2011), grief also emerges from the loss of the expectations that a mother may have had for her child, including dreams and achievements that may not be realized because of a child's disability. While their child is still alive, there is no social recognition for this kind of and rather complicated loss, which means that many women do not get the help they need to cope with their feelings. This is made worse by the stigma that comes with disability, making the bereaved persons to withdraw, not seek help and be even more emotional. In many children, the grief reoccurs in cycles, when there are celebrations such as birthdays or school functions or when they are compared to typical children.

In this respect, social integration becomes an important psychological asset. Social connectedness is defined as the feeling of having meaningful relationships and being connected to a larger social structure and has a buffering effect on emotional distress, loneliness and other detrimental effects of unresolved grief. Mothers of children with disabilities, however, are socially isolated because caregiving is time-consuming, there are fewer opportunities to socialize, and they fear other people's stigmatization. They lose their social interaction and their social circles may gradually reduce in size thus denying them the emotional support they need. Such mothers often state that they feel socially isolated and often do not fit into mainstream parenting groups and forums as Zuurmond et al. (2020) noted.

Several psychological theories have a common thread that the bereaved need to have social support and recognition as they mourn. According to Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1982) on Attachment Theory, emotional connection is the key aspect when it comes to managing loss. Continuing bonds theory by Klass, Silverman & Nickman (1996) suggest that it is normal and even helpful to continue to maintain an inner connection with that which has been lost: a person, a role, or a dream. According to Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979) stigmatization or perceived exclusion threatens one's identity of belonging to a valued social group. According to Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (2000), lack of relatedness and support needs is associated with ill-being. Additionally, according to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), the society may disregard grief, and this creates doubt in the individuals that they are even supposed to grieve. There are other models that also support the dual process model and Worden's task model that shows how the coping strategies and the display of emotion are influenced by social and environmental factors.

This is true based on the following empirical researches; For example, Lee and Robbins (1995) suggested major domains of social integration, which are the number and quality of relationships, as well as the range of contacts, that are important for resilience in mourning. In the same vein, it is evident from the literature that perceived social support and social inclusion yield positive psychological health, while rejection or exclusion result in withdrawal, prolonged mourning, and other mental health problems such as depression or anxiety (Lee et al., 2001). Other researchers Bravo-Benítez et al. (2019) and Lang et al. (2011) have also established that mothers with children with a disability undergo through multiple and complex grief due to social invisibility or exclusion.

Besides this particular group, disenfranchised grief has been also identified in other groups of people. For instance, perinatal loss is associated with emotional inhibition and social exclusion primarily because the women are not supported by their friends, families, or other healthcare givers (Callister, 2006). Likewise, returning from the combat, a veteran may have unrecognised losses that affect his or her self-organisational stability and reintegration (Aloi, 2011). Each of these works, thus, points to the fact that the phenomenon of 'disenfranchised grief' is not only a loss of a loved one but is a much broader concept.

While there have been advances in the knowledge of DG, most of the current studies are qualitative, which employs contextualised interviews or stories. While these studies offer valuable insight into the emotional

experiences of marginalized groups, they often involve small and homogeneous samples, limiting the generalizability of their findings. Moreover, quantitative research that systematically examines the psychological variables associated with disenfranchised grief—such as perceived witnessing of grief or levels of social connectedness—remains limited. There is also a notable lack of culturally specific research, particularly in non-Western contexts such as India, where social structures, gender roles, and disability stigma may uniquely influence grief and coping.

1.1 Research Gap and Rationale

Given this background, the current study seeks to address several key gaps in the literature. First, it aims to move beyond descriptive or anecdotal accounts by employing a quantitative approach to measure the relationship between two important constructs: witnessing disenfranchised grief (i.e., the extent to which mothers feel their grief is seen and acknowledged) and social connectedness (i.e., the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging and emotional support). Second, this study focuses specifically on Indian mothers of differently abled children, a demographic that has been underrepresented in global research on grief and caregiving. Given the cultural, social, and familial dynamics that shape caregiving in India, findings from this study may provide culturally nuanced insights into the lived realities of this population.

By examining how the perception of witnessed grief correlates with and potentially predicts levels of social connectedness, this study aims to inform the development of targeted psychological interventions and policy frameworks. These could help professionals and caregivers better support mothers navigating both the emotional challenges of caregiving and the social barriers to expressing and processing their grief. It is hypothesized that greater perceived witnessing of grief will be associated with stronger social connectedness, suggesting that societal validation plays a key role in promoting emotional well-being.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The study involved a sample of 39 Indian mothers of differently abled children of age group 28-50. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the following inclusion criteria: being Indian, serving as the primary caregiver for a child with physical, developmental, or psychological disabilities for a minimum of one year. Exclusion criteria included mothers residing outside India, those who had recently experienced the loss of a close relative, and mothers whose index child was older than 18 years. Data were collected through Google Forms and surveys distributed across various special schools.

2.2 Tools for the Study

Two primary tools were used for data collection:

- Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief by Jean S St Clair (2013): The WDG is a 22-item Likert-scale questionnaire assessing the extent to which individuals feel their grief is witnessed. Higher scores reflect greater perceived witnessing. The scale shows excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$) and unidimensionality, with factor loadings between 0.40 and 0.78. It also demonstrates construct validity through significant negative correlations with grief and depression indicators.

- Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R) by Lee R. M., Draper, M., & Lee, S. (2001): The SCS-R is a 20-item scale using a 6-point Likert format to measure perceived social connectedness, including feelings of belonging versus isolation. It shows excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$) and strong construct, convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity, supporting its use as a reliable measure of interpersonal closeness.

2.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited from support groups for parents of differently abled children, schools, and social media platforms and online forums. Interested mothers who met the inclusion criteria were provided with information about the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to their participation. Participants completed the WDG and SCS-R questionnaires. Completed scales were collected and anonymized to protect confidentiality. Demographic information such as age, education level, employment status, and duration of caregiving were also recorded.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

The collected data were quantitatively analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 25). Descriptive statistics (mean, median and standard deviation) were calculated for both scales. A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to assess the linear relationship between witnessing disenfranchised grief and social connectedness. Subsequently, a linear regression analysis was conducted to determine if witnessing disenfranchised grief significantly predicted social connectedness.

2.5 Research Ethics

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Confidentiality of participants' personal information and responses was ensured throughout the study and in the reporting of results. The potential for emotional distress was acknowledged, and resources for support were made available if needed.

3   Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1. The mean score for Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief was 78.23 and median score was 83 (SD = 20.17), and the mean score for Social Connectedness was 72.28 and median score was 71 (SD = 13.10).

Table 1: Sample Size, Mean, Median and Standard Deviation

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief	39	78.23	83	20.171
Social Connectedness	39	72.28	71	13.095

3.2 Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between witnessing disenfranchised grief and social connectedness (r = .470), as shown in Table 2. This indicates that higher levels of perceived witnessed grief were significantly associated with increased social connectedness.

Table 2: Correlation Test Results of Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief and Social Connectedness

	Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief	Social Connectedness
Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief	1	.470**

Social Connectedness	.470**	1

Note: p < .01 (**) indicates the correlation is statistically significant at the 1% level.

3.3 Regression Analysis

A linear regression analysis was conducted with social connectedness as the dependent variable and witnessing disenfranchised grief as the predictor. The regression model was significant ($F(1, 37) = 10.47$, $p = .003$), accounting for approximately 22% of the variance in social connectedness ($R^2 = .220$). The regression coefficient for witnessing disenfranchised grief was significant ($\beta = .305$, $SE = .094$, $t = 3.236$, $p = .003$), indicating an association between witnessing disenfranchised grief and social connectedness. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Test Results

Variable		R	R²	SE	p-values
Witnessing Disenfranchised Grief		.47	.221	.094	.003

4 Discussion

The investigation into the interplay between witnessing disenfranchised grief and social connectedness reveals significant insights into the psychological and social dynamics of individuals confronted with loss. The descriptive statistics lay the groundwork for understanding the sample's characteristics, highlighting that the participants experienced a notable degree of witnessing disenfranchised grief, as indicated by a mean score of 78.23 and median score 83 with a standard deviation of 20. 17, alongside a substantial level of social connectedness, demonstrated by a mean score of 72.28 and median score 71 with a standard deviation of 13.095; to mitigate the impact of extreme values, the median was used to remove the outliers from the data and thus improve the reliability of the analysis. The utilization of Pearson correlation analysis further elucidated the relationship between these variables, unveiling a moderate positive correlation ($r = .470$) that underscores the tendency for individuals who perceive higher levels of witnessed grief to also report greater social connectedness; this observation suggests that the act of witnessing disenfranchised grief, rather than isolating individuals, may instead foster stronger social bonds, possibly as a means of coping or seeking support.

The regression analysis reinforces this notion by demonstrating that witnessing disenfranchised grief significantly predicts social connectedness, accounting for approximately 22% of the variance in social connectedness, which although modest, is indicative of a meaningful relationship between these variables, further suggesting that witnessing disenfranchised grief plays a significant role in shaping an individual's social experiences (Levy et al., 1994). This finding is particularly intriguing considering the potential for disenfranchised grief to be a socially isolating experience, yet the data suggests the opposite, which is that it is associated with enhanced social engagement, which could be seen as a method of reconstructing meaning after loss, highlighting the need to further investigate the protective mechanism of social connectedness in the context of grief (Neimeyer et al., 2006). While the study by Pollard et al., 2017 explores the grief experiences of graduate counseling students and reveals various emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal effects of grief, this study uniquely focuses on the correlation between witnessing

disenfranchised grief and social connectedness, thus adding a new dimension to understanding grief's social ramifications.

The current findings both corroborate and diverge from existing literature on grief and social support. Contrary to other studies that point to grief as causative of social isolation, the current study shows that witnessing disenfranchised grief actually fosters togetherness (Lofland, 1985). This could be explained by attachment theory which asserts that people seek comfort in others when they are troubled as a way of coping with their emotions and therefore enhancing their psychological health (Currier et al., 2014). Perhaps, witnessing disenfranchised grief also helps to enhance the understanding of the need for social connection with those who have had similar loss experiences and, thus, increases social cohesion; in other words, witnessing to disenfranchised grief can be viewed as an honest signal of commitment, which indicates that an individual wants to develop a strong non-transactional relationship (Winegard et al., 2014). The concept of social connectedness may also be associated with the changes in social mourning, especially the use of social networks in the grieving process (Harju, 2014).

However, it is important to note that the variance explained by the model means that there are other factors that equally influence social connectedness; these are; social networks, personality, coping styles, and cultural attitude towards grief and support. Further research should be conducted on these variables to have more elaborate insight into the relationship between grief, social relationships and psychological health. Although the variance is 22%, it is important because it shows that observing other's grief does have a moderate effect on social connectedness but not a significant one. Therefore, the interventions targeting social isolation and loneliness of people experiencing grief should take into account the factors related to the witnesses of disenfranchised grief, which would require developing the support programs for this type of loss.

5   Conclusion

his research shows that there is a weak positive relationship between the variables of the study; thus, grief observation may lead to increased social connectedness rather than disconnectedness. The people experiencing the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief may actively look for support and belonging to address feelings, as well as strengthen their social bonds. Regression analysis affirms this as disenfranchised grief has a moderate positive correlation with social connectedness, explaining 22% of its variance. This result indicates that grief is not preventing individuals from forming social relationships or remaining active in society, but rather plays a role in shaping their social engagement. While this percentage indicates that other factors contribute to social connectedness, it underscores the role grief observation plays in shaping interpersonal relationships.

These findings align with attachment theory, emphasizing the role of social support in emotional regulation. Witnessing grief may evoke empathy and a shared understanding, encouraging individuals to form or strengthen social bonds. Digital platforms play a significant role in shaping grief-related social interactions, offering avenues for connection, solidarity, and communal mourning that can strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of belonging. However, other factors such as personality, coping mechanisms, and cultural norms warrant further exploration to fully understand the complexities of grief and social engagement.

Some people like the grieving mothers may after losing their children be confined to bed and may not go out, but after some time they get up and start attending to other activities and functioning in the society.

This is why it is important to understand that grief can be expressed in many different ways and it also shows that connection to others is protective in dealing with loss.

6   Implications

It is important to recognise disenfranchised grief not only as a concern for mothers of children with a disability but also for those who experience complicated pregnancy and delivery, like miscarriage, stillbirth, or traumatic childbirth. This is also useful in developing models of support that can help address the loss and grief of such patients in order to enhance their reintegration into society. It is advisable that mental health care providers consider developing programs that will help to tackle these phenomena and offer them to the concerned persons. In the same way, teachers of differently abled students should be made aware of the effects of disenfranchised grief and also should be encouraged to help the mothers in a more appropriate manner, so that there will be a better understanding and acceptance of the children and the parents as well.

It is recognized that families, friends and other social contacts are part of the social context of the grieving person and how the concept of disenfranchised grief is understood. Informing them that grieving should not be denied or dismissed but should be accepted can go a long way in enhancing the social welfare of the grieving persons. It is possible to enhance social relations and ensure that people who go through loss do not feel lonely and isolated when they are surrounded by others who understand them. This understanding can be achieved by use of awareness campaigns, counselling sessions and other community based activities. Future research should also seek to understand how digital grief support platforms contribute to increasing the access of the individuals to emotional and social support.

It is important to note that there are differences in the way people grieve and this paper seeks to establish that. Culturally, people grieve in different ways, and the interventions should be made considering the cultural background of the people, personality, and how the people deal with issues. It is therefore important for future studies to investigate the above factors that may act as moderator to enhance social connectedness among the different groups of people. Culturalised approaches could help to build up the psychological protection for emotional health, thus supporting the concept of grief as a process that does not weaken relations but rather strengthens them.

7   Limitations of the Study

The participants of the study were mainly from Kerala and hence cultural factors may vary in other states, which could be a possible limitation that can be filled in future research. Also, the sample size was small and was taken from only 39 individuals. Although the number is quite high, it can be understood that a larger sample size could potentially give more generalizable data and would enhance the reliability of the conclusions. As for the limitations of the current study, it is proposed that the subsequent research should involve a larger and more heterogeneous sample of participants so that the findings would be more generalizable to various cultural and social settings.

8   Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should focus on other factors that enable mothers to be socially connected in the future. Exploring the other factors like coping styles, personality characteristics and community environment may also help to understand how social integration is facilitated. The studies can be enhanced if the type and severity of the disability of the child is also included in the study. Further, the studies should be carried

out on different or multiple population groups in order to test the generalizability of such findings across various cultural and social settings. Another area of research that should be carried out in the future is the matter of tertiary grief and loss in mothers who had a complicated pregnancy such as accidental abortion, stillbirth or traumatic birth. Further research should be conducted in these areas in order to gain more insight of the various aspects of grieving and social relationships.

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