The impact of child loss on career decision-making and trajectory

Research Article

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Abstract

This small-scale mixed methods research project sought to explore the impact of child loss on career decision-making and trajectory, through an online survey completed by bereaved parents. The findings highlighted that grief is unique, but there were considerable, shared experiences amongst survey participants which impact on career trajectories, notably an ongoing emotional response to bereavement. Detailed analysis of the data revealed three key themes – the depth, intensity and longevity of grief symptoms; inconsistent employer support; and changing perceptions of career. The longevity of grief symptoms, and the lack of engagement with formal careers support, were the most surprising findings, which have not been adequately researched previously.

Key words: child loss; impact on career; career decision-making

Introduction

Child loss is a significant and catastrophic event, impacting every aspect of a parent's life including career decision-making and trajectory. Very little has been written about the relationship between bereavement, working, and career, in the career guidance literature. My MSc research was a starting point to fill that gap, generating discussions about the impact of child loss specifically on career decision-making and trajectory, and what this in turn could mean for career practitioners.

In 2020, 8,397 people aged between 1 day to 30 years died in the UK (ONS, 18 January 2022), often the children of working age biological parents and stepparents. In England and Wales, the average age of having a first child is 29, and the average age of retirement is 66 (ONS, 8 April 2024), suggesting a bereaved parent could be actively employed for another 30 plus years post-loss. With newly bereaved parents and stepparents joining this group each year, the cumulative impact on employers and the economy could be significant, the loss of engagement with work and career a potential outcome following the loss of a child.

As a bereaved parent, I have been on my own journey of career exploration, making the decision post-loss, to train as a career guidance practitioner. Through my own training programme and talking to other bereaved parents, I became more alert to the difficulties and challenges experienced by bereaved parents in relation to work and career following the death of their child. Anecdotal stories were shared regularly in bereavement support groups and online forums, with bereaved parents, including myself, experiencing a mix of both supportive and unsupportive responses from employers and careers advisers. Many described the loss of career as a secondary loss to the primary loss of their child.

Literature review

An initial literature search on child loss and career development generated no direct results, so I switched focus to researching child loss; bereavement and work; and relevant career theories. I specifically focused on literature written about the Western World, from the late 20th and early 21st century, which provided the foundation upon which I developed an overview of child loss and the potential resultant impact on career decision-making and trajectory.

For this research, work is defined as a specific position or task that you do in exchange for pay, whereas the word 'career' is used to reflect a coming together of all parts of our life – our work, our values, our learning – which is continually changing and evolving (Hooley et al, 2024). Redekopp (2017) argues that every decision we make in life is a career decision, reinforcing the idea that career is not one finite thing, but an amalgam of all aspects of our lives.

Almost all of the literature reviewed discussed returning to work post-loss as a subsection of a wider paper, with a paper written by Wilson et al (2021) noting that there had only been four previous reports written about generalised bereavement and the workplace. What these four previous reports highlighted was the ongoing and wide-ranging impact that child loss can have on workplace behaviour, from going to work and underperforming, to resignation and using work as an escapism. A report by Sue Ryder, published in 2020, noted that in 2019 24% of the working population had experienced a bereavement in the previous twelve months (Sue Ryder, 2020). Wilson et al (2021) flagged that more research on the potential impact of bereavement on workplaces needed to be done, as these impacts go largely unrecognised or unrecorded.

The literature signals that for bereaved parents, the impact of grief on employment can be prolonged. Macdonald et al (2015) stress that a return to work is not straightforward, as the bereaved parent is fundamentally changed. They have an unwanted new identity that has no end point or predictable course to follow. Further, in their 2010 study, Gibson et al note

that of the parents that had been bereaved for two to six years, none of them felt that their concentration and memory had reached pre-bereavement levels. Consequently, my research focused on the impact of child loss on career, and what that means for the employment of the bereaved parent, now and in the future.

It is said that the death of a child goes against the norm (Bekkering & Woodgate, 2021). Parental bereavement is known to be multi-dimensional with simultaneous affective, cognitive, behavioural, social and marital changes occurring (Murphy et al, 2003). Arnold and Gemma (2008) found grief in bereaved parents to be 'complex, ongoing, and non-linear' regardless of how long it had been since the child died. It is also the case that many bereaved parents demonstrate higher levels of complicated grief (Alam et al, 2012; Bekkering & Woodgate, 2021; Wonch Hill et al, 2017). Suttle et al (2022) found that 52% of bereaved parents tested positive for moderate or severe depression, and 44% for PTSD, 13 months after the death of their child. In a study by Murphy et al (2003) nearly 70% of participants said that it took three to four years to assimilate their child's death and continue with their own lives, regardless of reason for death. These parents also reported higher levels of mental health conditions, compared to the general population in the same age range, five years post-loss.

Given that there is a clear body of evidence that psychological illness including depression, anxiety and PTSD all have a negative impact on career decision-making (Marks et al, 2021), it is highly likely that child loss will have a significant impact on career development too. However, there is almost no literature that focuses on the topic. This is particularly surprising given that bereaved parents are often in their prime earning and productivity years, and that there is clear evidence that bereavement can impact on working experiences. Some parents for example may have stopped working to care for a sick child (Macdonald et al, 2015; Randall, 2017). Others may have taken time off work immediately following bereavement but may find it difficult to resume their normal work activities when they return to work (Fox et al, 2014). There is also some evidence that men and women grieve the loss of a child differently, with men more likely to use work as a distraction technique in the early years, and women more likely to stay at home caring for other children (Alam et al, 2012). Wilson et al (2020) conducted a study of 14 bereaved parents and the impact of grief on their employment. Parents reacted in very different ways, with some returning to work three weeks post-loss and others absent for more than a year. Returning to work may also raise significant fears, such as facing work colleagues, being the subject of gossip and receiving little support, with the offer of workplace adjustments being a key driver determining if, or when, the bereaved parent returns to work (Macdonald et al, 2015; Wilson et al, 2020). This demonstrates that although it is likely that child loss will impact career development, the ways in which it impacts can vary between individuals and depends on their circumstances.

Despite the clear impact of child loss on workplace experiences, there is almost no research on career development more broadly, including how bereaved parents may feel about their careers and the career decisions they might make. This current project aimed to address this gap by asking two key questions – firstly, how does the loss of a living child or children impact on career decision-making and trajectory? And secondly, how does this reflect or challenge existing career theory and practice, and add to the limited academic literature currently in circulation?

Methods

Acknowledging concerns about the sensitive nature of the topic, the ethics of undertaking this research were considered at every stage of survey development – in particular confidentiality, duty of care, and informed consent. All data generated was anonymised to protect individual family identity, and individual personal data was aggregated to identify themes and patterns in the descriptive statistics.

To explore the impact of child loss on career development, a single stage, mixed methods, online survey was conducted. A survey approach allowed for the research to develop an initial evidence base of the scale and type of impact child loss could have on career development. As the research was emotionally demanding and as my own experience so closely mirrored that of the participants (Johnson, 2009) an online survey also enabled me to better manage my emotional response, and limit any potential researcher bias, to the information provided.

The survey contained a series of multiple-choice questions with free text boxes to provide more detail, plus two stand-alone qualitative questions focusing on the impact of grief-related symptoms on career, and perception of career and work post-bereavement. Adopting this approach enabled me to create baseline quantitative data, layered with rich insight from the personal stories of child loss and career. Questions were grouped by subject including optional questions about the deceased child; career and work experience prior to the loss of their child/children; impact on work, career, workplace adjustments, finances and health at both six months and two years/present situation post-loss; and experience of career guidance and perceptions of work. The two qualitative questions asked participants, 'If you feel able, please can you provide details of how these grief experiences impacted on your working life/career two years after the loss of your child/children?' and 'In your own words please could you describe how your career, and the way you feel about your career, has changed over time since the loss of your child/children, up to the present day?' The deliberate choice of survey questions allowed me to focus on any changes to work and career, and the potential impact on career theory and practice, without getting drawn into discussions about employer and HR practices.

The survey was open only to those who had been bereaved six months or more, recognising that early bereavement can be intense and disorientating. The Participant Information Sheet which explained the purpose of the research, clearly explained that some questions may be distressing and that participants could exit at any point. Participants had to check a tick box to confirm understanding and consent.

Participation was endorsed by the CEO of a bereavement charity, The Compassionate Friends (TCF), and recruitment to the survey was initially via the TCF closed Facebook group pages. A snowball approach was adopted, encouraging participants to share the survey link with other bereaved parents, recognising that members of the TCF groups were likely to be members of other child-loss groups.

The survey debrief document included contact details for a number of bereavement charities and support groups with immediate access to online support resources and helpline numbers if required.

Results

The survey was completed by 101 participants. Ninety-two selected their gender as woman, and most were of working age when their child died. The child's age at death was between 1 day to 46 years, with more than half aged between 17–27 years old. The age of the child appears to make no difference to the intensity and emotion of the loss (Schiff, 1978).

I used descriptive statistics for multiple-choice answers, as there was no previous research in this field to compare my results with. Similarly, as there had been a high percentage of participants identifying as women, this also made it difficult to generalise the results to the population as a whole.

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019) was used for all free text and qualitative question answers. QCA and thematic analysis are similar approaches in that both focus on interpreting data; considering content and context; and identifying themes that emerge from the analysis. Where the two approaches differ is that within thematic analysis a theme is thought to be latent – to have symbolic meaning underlying the behaviours observed. QCA can be considered to be a more simplistic approach, whereby the researcher chooses how much information to include within a category or theme. The focus is on looking for trends in the data, and using frequency of a theme or code, to find meaning (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

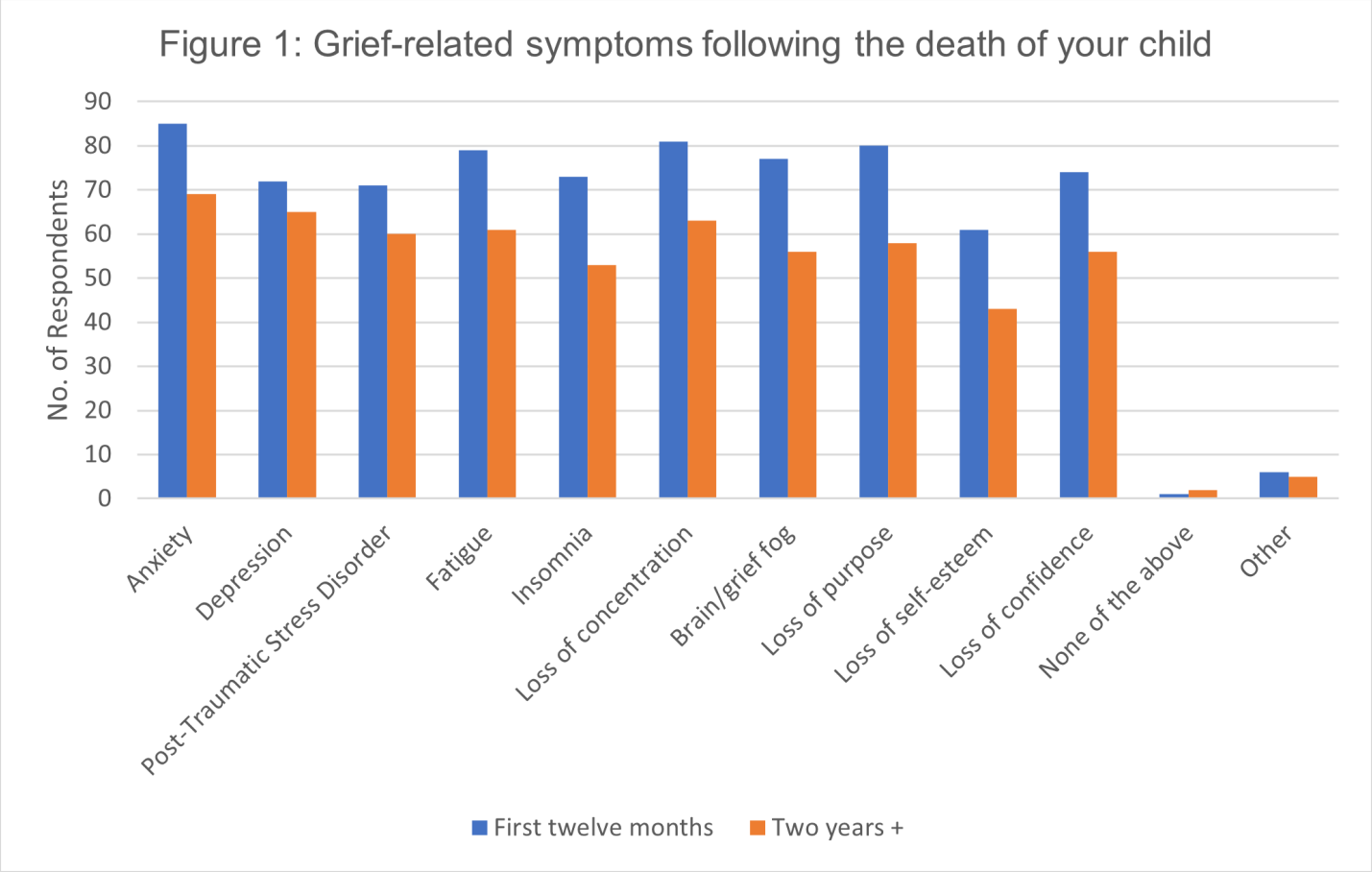
Adopting QCA as my analysis approach for all free text and qualitative answers enabled me to identify broad themes from all free text and qualitative question answers, identifying frequency of words used, emotions expressed, and interpreting meaning from the context of the questions asked. From this analysis I gained a holistic insight into bereaved parents' career experience post-loss, with three key themes emerging: the depth, intensity and longevity of grief symptoms; employer support; and perceptions of career.

Grief symptoms

Figure 1 illustrates the grief symptoms experienced in the first twelve months, and after two years. Participants selected from a pre-defined list of twelve symptoms commonly experienced by people following a bereavement, compiled from those most frequently mentioned during the literature review and from published online resources from two charities – Child Bereavement UK and The Compassionate Friends UK.

It was found that nine of the twelve symptoms listed were experienced by over seventy participants in the first twelve months, and over half of the participants after two years, with anxiety being the highest reported at both points. Only two participants did not select any grief symptoms after two years.

Figure 1. Grief-related symptoms



Emotional responses could vary, and different feelings of guilt emerged in the verbatim comments. One participant felt guilty that she had been focused on career while their child was alive and now regrets the time lost. Conversely another felt guilty that since she was no longer caring for her disabled daughter, her career had flourished. For some, their emotional experiences created significant barriers to returning to work such as panic attacks and anxiety. Highlighting the impact on career, one participant said:

> …there is no difference between the work person and the person you are at home. Both impact and so more help is needed when personal circumstances tragically overwhelm and will forever, note forever (even after nearly 13 years) every aspect of my life.

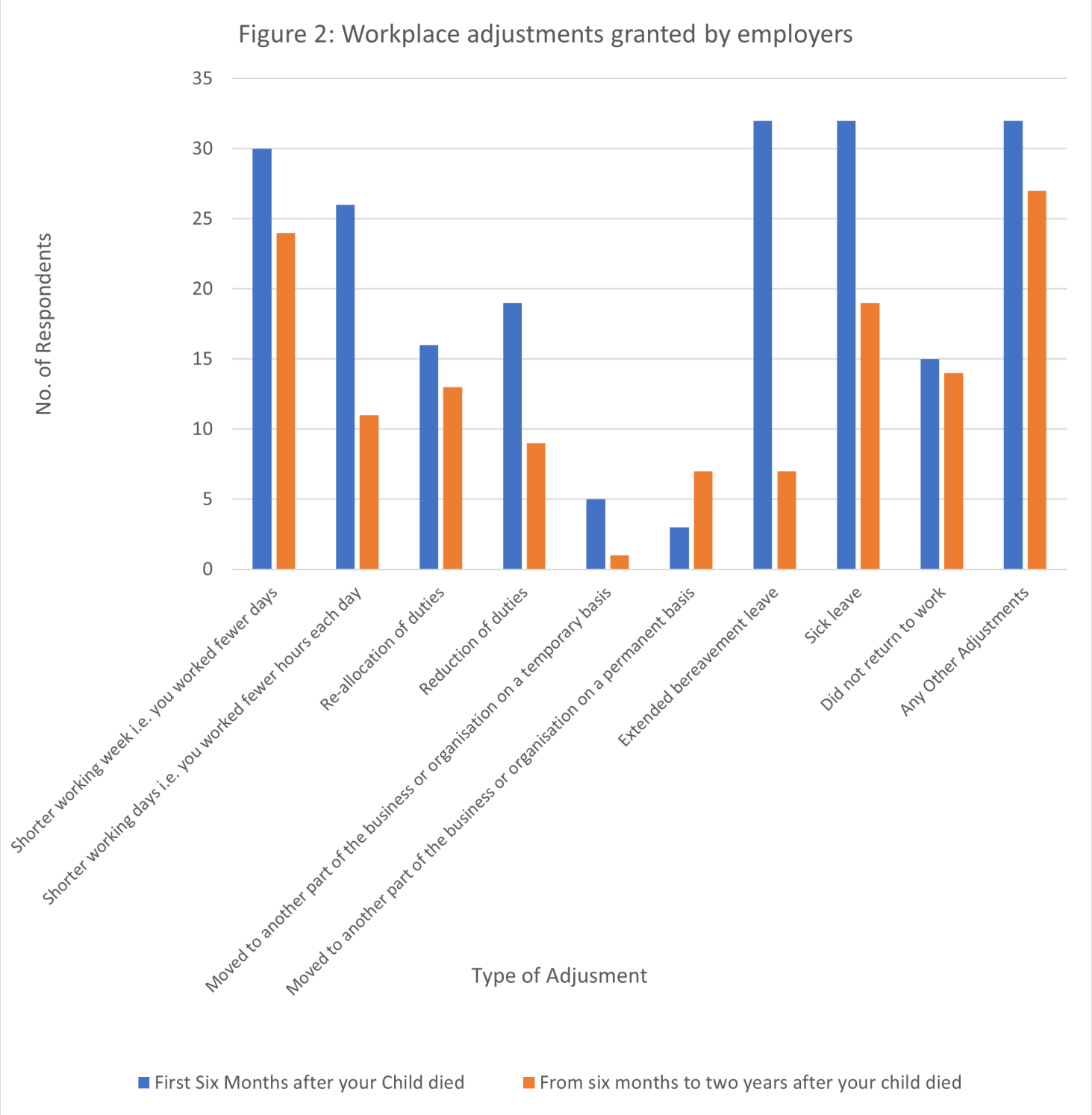
Another said:

> Some days it was hard to even get out of bed, let alone leave the house to work.

Employer support

Workplace adjustments such as extended leave, shorter working week/day and re-allocation of duties were utilised in the first six months by 80 participants. Thirty-two participants also selected any other adjustments, verbatim comments indicating that these included not having to answer or make phone calls, phased returns and home working.

Figure 2. Workplace adjustments



Between six months and two years, the number of participants granted adjustments dropped slightly to 75 participants. Verbatim comments indicated that most support was withdrawn after one year, despite ongoing grief symptoms being experienced.

Despite workplace adjustments being in place for the majority, 95 participants still felt their employer had been unsupportive after their child loss and in need of training. Free text comments highlighted issues such as changes of line management not being handled

well and having to tell their story to someone new; work colleagues not knowing how to speak to them; and managers not understanding the need, fifteen years post-loss, to be on holiday on the date of their child's death. One participant said:

> Think people try to support in the first year, but after that – people move on, or 'forget' and the ability to stand up and ask for support gets harder.

Perceptions of career

In the survey two questions were asked relating to perceptions of career. Firstly, participants were asked if there had been a change in their view of the importance of work and career since their child died. A majority – 74 participants – felt there had been a change in their view of the importance of work and career, but 49 had not made changes to their employment up to two years post-loss. A review of the free text answers highlighted two years post-loss was considered early in recovering from the death of a child, and for many the severity of grief emotions resulted in them making very few changes in the early years. Rather, some individuals made changes to career much later, up to 14-years post-loss.

> 9 years after losing X I changed my job completely. It was very hard and scary to move somewhere where no one knows my daughter.

The kinds of changes made included working fewer hours, retiring early or retraining in a different field. Two participants retrained as teachers to allow them to work with young people; another trained as a grief counsellor ten years after the death of her child; and another dedicated her time to writing a book on child loss, and now runs grief support activities. These survey participants needed to find work with meaning and purpose, and this very much mirrors my own experience, leaving a successful career in human resources to retrain as a career guidance practitioner, eighteen months after my daughter died.

Additionally, five participants shared that the death of their child had a positive impact on their career, with charities being set up, and new career opportunities that honoured their child, becoming available.

Participants also described feeling differently about work, seeing it as a distraction or financial necessity, with 46 stating work and career were no longer important. For example, one participant left their job as a Director of Finance and is now working for her local council as an administrative assistant. Another left her role as a teacher and is now working in a shop. One participant said:

> I have only continued working because I've had to for financial reasons…Since my daughter died, I have had the attitude of 'nothing really matters' towards most things, work included.

While another reflected on the loss of their career:

> I previously managed 3 teams and was on a talent management programme…I was incredibly career focused... My career plan is completely out the window. I guess I'm grieving my career as well.

The second question focused on engagement with a career practitioner, and despite many participants stating that their views of work and career had changed, only one of

the 101 survey participants had sought formal career support after their child had died. However, 62 participants had discussed career and work options with family and friends, demonstrating that career discussions are taking place, but not with a national careers service, private career coach, or supported by career guidance practitioners.

Discussion

The research findings unequivocally showed the catastrophic impact of the death of a child on a parent's career, not just in the immediate aftermath but for many years thereafter. Grief symptoms continued to impact the bereaved parent for several years post-loss, having a direct impact on participant experiences in the workplace.

However, the research also suggested that employers often did not have the resources to provide the necessary support to staff over the longer term. Participants stated that they needed time to adjust; flexibility; and to feel supported at work when their confidence was low, and anxiety high. Yet employer support was often withdrawn after 12 months.

Blustein (2013) suggests that work is an essential component of life and mental health, yet over half of the participants reported that work and career had lost all meaning for them post-loss. Some participants engaged in new forms of work (often in some kind of honour of their child) which could provide new meanings and a sense of purpose, but this was not the experience of the majority. This is important because although different career theories attempt to explain the role of emotions or trauma response in career guidance, such as life-design counselling (Savickas, 2012; 2013), these theories can often focus on finding new narratives and moving on. In contrast, in this research no participants talked about recovering from their loss or moving on – the death of their child is something they are unable to reframe as something positive or leave behind. It is not something to recover from, but to try and assimilate into their lives going forward.

A more useful perspective is offered by Corso (2015) who argues that as individuals reflect on their trauma, they will construct a narrative to help them make sense of what has happened. She believes that career practitioners have a clear role to play in helping clients write a narrative that gives meaning to their suffering. Unlike Savickas, Corso (2015) explicitly points out that people who have an unexpected career change need significant emotional support. The implications of this current research are that career practitioners working with bereaved parents should not seek to minimise or gloss over experiences of child loss, but to acknowledge the depth and intensity of grief symptoms and emotions, including anxiety, low confidence, and self-esteem. They should also be equipped to support the bereaved parent to investigate, navigate and work with their loss, helping them identify ways in which they could move forward with meaning and purpose, and recognising that for some the traumatic event could be the catalyst for career change in many different guises.

However, to be able to do this may require careers professionals to access specialist training and be provided with the support and structures necessary to work with clients at this kind of depth. With the majority of participants seeking careers support from friends and family, there is an evident need for careers support, but at the moment there is a risk that bereaved parents do not know where to access professional career guidance, and that they will not be able to access the level of support they need.

In this research, 73% of participants reported a change in the importance of work, with most stating that work and career were no longer important to them. It is clear from the survey results that bereaved parents would benefit from career guidance at some point post-loss. Participants are making career decisions based solely on the views of family and friends, rather than engaging the help of impartial career guidance professionals, either through government funded bodies or private career coaching. All of the UK Home Nations have website resources for adults with an option to make an appointment, but this does not appear to be widely promoted. If adult guidance services were more visible and positively promoted in the community, it is worth considering whether more bereaved parents would engage with them. This also brings up another issue – that of missed opportunities for employers to work in partnership with local career guidance services, including private career coaches, to provide a service to any employee needing career guidance. From the findings, we know that bereaved parents are looking to their employers to do more to support them, and engaging the services of career guidance practitioners has the potential to be viewed by bereaved parents as another support service, like counselling and bereavement groups – a valuable resource to be utilised.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has created a starting point for further research into career decision-making and trajectory for bereaved parents. The results highlight that grief is unique, prolonged and complex, with bereaved parents experiencing a range of intense emotions over a significant period of time leading to disillusionment and disengagement with work and career. Most participants did not make significant changes to their career in the early years of loss, yet 73% stated their view of the importance of work and career was adversely changed.

The perceived lack of support from employers, coupled with low visibility of career guidance services resulted in very low engagement with career services. This population of working age adults have faced a significant challenge in finding meaning and purpose in their work and career since the loss of their child. Career practitioners have an important role to play in helping them re-establish a positive relationship with work and career. For some it will be about re-engaging with their current employer or workplace environment; for others it may be about making changes in career direction; and for others it could be the opportunity to engage in activities that reflect the relationship they had with their child. Briefly reflecting on my own bereavement experience, I have embarked on a career change, retraining as a career guidance practitioner, and subsequently completing the MSc Career Guidance and Development. Through this research, I remember my daughter Rachael and all the other deceased children and give a voice to their parents who are often a hidden population in society.

Several career theories attempt to explain the role of emotions or trauma response in career guidance, yet they focus on finding new narratives and moving on. Not one participant talked about recovering from their loss – their deceased child remained central to their career decision-making. As was highlighted by Corso (2015) career counselling for bereaved parents needs to be done slowly and thoughtfully, with career practitioners acknowledging the depth and intensity of emotions. The practitioner will also need to be expert in helping the bereaved parent explore, navigate and possibly reframe career options, and in recognising and considering any dysfunctional or self-limiting beliefs.

There were two primary limitations of this study. Firstly, those who participated were mostly members of bereavement support groups, used to sharing their experience of child loss generally. This could be considered a sub-group of all those bereaved of a child, which in turn could skew the survey results towards a particular sub-group of bereaved parents. Secondly the survey was completed by predominantly white, educated women. A handful of men did complete the survey but a higher number of male and/or ethnic minority respondents may have generated different results. That said the survey has provided a baseline starting point from which further research could be conducted.

From the findings of this research, it is possible to conclude with some recommendations for careers services, and practitioners:

- That all career practitioners are provided with the opportunity to undertake bereavement training, to enable them to work with bereaved individuals either directly, or through referral to a specialist practitioner.
- Career guidance practitioners are impartial professionals whose practice should be informed by ethical principles. The role and value of the career guidance practitioner, as a trusted ally in career decision-making, should be actively promoted to bereaved parents through various channels such as employers, bereavement charities and community engagement.
- Trauma-informed practice recognises and understands that exposure to trauma can impact a person's psychological, biological, neurological, and social development. In line with the growth of trauma-informed practice in education and health care provision, career guidance should also be a space in which being trauma-informed is central to our practice; that career practitioners are alert to grief emotions and recognise the importance of acknowledging experiences of grief, including child loss, where appropriate in career guidance interventions. Practitioners should handle grief emotions with patience and empathy and recognise the significance of grief in career decision-making.
- That employers and career practitioners should seek opportunities to work in partnership, offering services to bereaved employees that supports them through this traumatic life event. Adult career services are not actively promoted, so participants were unaware that such a service existed.

The bereaved parents in this study were a small population of working age adults in the UK, most of whom faced significant challenges in finding meaning and purpose in their work and career following the loss of their child. This research has explored some of these career challenges, and provided a baseline for further research into career decision-making and trajectory for this group. As career practitioners we have an important role in helping the bereaved parent re-establish a positive relationship with work and career, whatever shape that takes.

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