Killed in combat: A Qualitative Analysis of a Parent’s Grief Process

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Abstract

This longitudinal qualitative-phenomenological study describes the grief process of two parents who lost a son in combat during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The couple was interviewed three times over the year following the death of their son. Four main themes emerged from the data: coping strategies, sources of support, stressors, and grief over time. The parents seemed to have different coping strategies in which the mother coped with her son’s death by trying to keep him psychologically present, whereas the father tried to avoid the stress by at times isolating himself. Most of the support the parents received came from members of their late son’s military unit. The most stressful event reported by the couple was the first holiday season without their son. After a year of time, both parents reported still grieving the loss of their son, although the emotional intensity had lessened.
Literature Review

Although a definite number is unknown, it is estimated that there are at least 152,000 United States troops stationed in the Middle East (Global Security, 2007). To date there have been 4,662 U. S. Soldiers killed in the Global War on Terror (The Cost of War, 2009). These soldiers leave behind grieving spouses, children, siblings, and parents. Although the grieving process in general and for specific types of loss has been widely investigated (Van Der Heijden & Dijkstra, 2007), research examining the grief process related to death from combat is very limited.

Kubler-Ross (1969) describes the grieving process as a progression of stages that individuals work through, these stages consist of: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This progression through stages seems to be true for both those experiencing their own fatality as well as for individuals grieving the loss of someone close (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Other researchers believe that the grieving process is a highly individualized experience that does not consists of stages or a definitive sequence (Mallon, 2008). Thus, the process that works for one person may not work for another.

According to Worden (1991) grieving is an active process in which there are several realities and issues grieving individuals must face. These include acknowledging the reality of the loss, working through the emotional turmoil, adjusting to the environment where the deceased is absent, and letting go of the connection to the deceased. The process of grieving consists of personal decisions regarding how we choose to cope with the reality and emotions of the loss (Ivancovich & Wong, 2008). This could mean people turning to religion, family members, or even drugs and alcohol to find comfort regarding the loss of their loved one.
It is widely believed that the circumstances and cause of death affect the grieving process. These circumstances consist of: anticipated death, unanticipated death, and the strength of attachment shared between the person grieving and the deceased person. For instance, the process faced by people grieving a loved one killed in a traffic accident would differ from the process of people grieving the death of a love one who had suffered from cancer for years. Although the research evidence is limited, it has been found that people confronted with an anticipated death typically limit contact with the dying person (Lane, 2007). It has also been found that grieving individuals who shared a strong attachment with a deceased person who was killed unexpectedly face a greater grief experience compared to a low shared attachment and anticipated death (Wayment & Vierthaler, 2002).

Although the research to date is still inconclusive as to the extent the circumstances surrounding death and cause of death have on the grieving process, researchers continue to study the grieving process across various populations such as adults, adolescents, and children. Gorer (1965) was one of the first researchers to suggest that the most distressing and long-lasting grief was experienced by people who had lost an adult child. Gorer’s position has been supported by other researchers and was eventually broadened to include children of all ages (Sanders, 1989).

Parents share a genetic bond with their children which may be visible in the child’s hair color, eye color, body frame, voice, laugh, etc. (Sanders, 1989). Over the years parents project themselves onto their children or, as the parents perceive them, their alter egos (Sanders, 1989). When the child passes away the parent does not only mourn
the loss of the child, but the parent feels a part of them has died with the child as well (Sanders, 1989).

Parents have also reported feeling guilty after their child has passed away; this has been found to be the most notable aspect of parental grief (Rando, 1988). When parents lose a child they may feel that they have failed at the most basic function that a parent has, protecting and providing for his/her child (Rando, 1988). Even if the death of the child was completely out of the control of the parents, their identity is challenged because they could not complete the most basic function of parenting (Rando, 1988).

Parents have been known to experience lifelong effects of losing a child to death in which they never fully stop grieving. Neimeyer, Keese, & Fortner, (2000) state: “The meaning of the loss changes somewhat over time; however, the feeling of stress my never dissipate”. According to Fish (1986), parents never heal from the loss of an adult child; they gradually must accept the pain. He further adds that this pain fluctuates in intensity and changes over time but does not diminish and never disappears (Fish, 1986).

Mothers and fathers have been found to present different emotions after the loss of an adult child. Mothers tend to exhibit anger, despair, and depersonalization, whereas the fathers tend to experience isolation, desolation, a loss of control, and a fear of death (Rando, 1986).

Despite this research that has been conducted on the grief of parents there has been very little research studying the grieving process of parents that lost an adult child due to military combat. The only research available on this population was a study conducted with 13 parents from the Middle-East that lost sons during various Palestinian conflicts (Ronel & Lebel, 2006). This study examined the aspects of anger and
forgiveness in the grieving process of these parents. One finding was that parents in this study reported feeling anger toward the political leaders of their country (Ronel & Lebel, 2006). Eleven of the thirteen reported being politically active before the deaths of their sons and the intensity of the involvement increased after the loss of their sons (Ronel & Lebel, 2006).

This lack of research on the grieving process of military parents’ raises many interesting questions related to their grieving experiences. How does the support of other military families and the comfort of knowing that their adult child died for a cause aid the family in the grieving process? If the family did not support the war or has ill feelings toward the military, government, or leadership of the government does that impact their grieving process?

Furthermore, little is known about the impact a military death has on family relationships, especially the parents’ marital relationship. Some parents who lost their child to suicide or homicide report feeling intense shame, guilt, and anger through the grief process, leading to a lack of communication and strain on their marriage (Arnold & Gemma, 2008). However, the negative impact of loss may differ for parents of a child killed in combat, rather from natural causes or accidents. The death of a child in combat may bring the parents closer together because they are going through this tragedy together (Arnold & Gemma, 2008).

The purpose of this longitudinal qualitative study is to describe the grieving process of two military parents who experienced the loss of their son as result of combat exposure during Operation Iraqi Freedom.
Methods

Data Collection

The data for this study was obtained from a larger study examining the adjustment to deployment and reunion for both reservists and their families, which consisted of a spouse, significant other, or parent. This larger study was conducted by the Military Family Research Institute (MFRI) at Purdue University and was funded by the United States Department of Defense. For the results of this larger study see Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss (2008)

All participants for this larger study were recruited from an Army Reserve unit of 119 members deployed to Iraq for 15 months early in 2003. All participants were deployed together in February 2003, and returned to the United States in April of 2004. Although the unit was based in the Midwest, 25% of the deployed reservists were activated from around the country to fulfill empty positions within the unit.

All of the soldiers within the unit returned from Iraq except for one soldier who was killed by an IED. The parents of this soldier asked to participate in this study despite the loss of their son. Although the parents participated in the study, their data were excluded from the analysis due to being an outlier. Permission has been obtained from the Director of MFRI, Dr. Shelley MacDermid, to conduct a secondary data analysis using the parents’ data that was excluded from the previously mentioned study.

The larger study consisted of seven waves of interviews that were conducted during the year following the reservists’ return from deployment. The first interview was conducted within 3 weeks of the reservists’ return. The other six interviews occurred at 4, 6, 12, 24, 36, and 52 weeks following return. However, the parents of the deceased
soldier joined the study late and thus were interviewed a total of three times over an eight month period. The first interview was conducted seven months after their son had been killed in action. There was a five month interval span between the first and the second interview and three months between the second and third interview.

The larger study utilized a semi structured interview format that consisted of interview questions in the areas of: stressors, coping mechanisms, marital relationship, parent-child relationship, friendships, and social support. The same interview format and content areas were used for interviewing the parents but some of the questions were altered and new questions were added to accommodate the unique situation of the couple. Examples of questions asked include: “Since the last interview, what have been some stressors that you have experienced?” “Since the last time we talked where or to whom have you gone when you needed help, advice or support?”

Both parents were interviewed at the same time in their home but in separate rooms. The father was interviewed by a male graduate student and the mother was interviewed by a female graduate student. The same questions were asked of both parents but the interviewer’s probing questions obviously differed.

The interviewers attended a training seminar to learn interview protocol and procedures and in order to establish rapport the parents were interviewed by the same person at each time-point. The parents were sent inexpensive tokens of appreciation (e.g., keychains) and hand-written thank-you notes after each interview. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.
Data Analysis

For this study, I conducted a descriptive time series case study analysis (Yin, 2009), describing the grieving process for a set of parents whose son was killed in military combat. I used strategies recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and developed a time-ordered matrix to help organize the information. The categories emerged from the data and consisted of: support, stressors, emotions experienced (grief reactions), quality of family/couple relations, coping strategies, reactions towards the war and a miscellaneous category. Under the appropriate category I recorded the parent’s statements, my observations, emerging themes and any interesting quotes. Once I had read all 6 transcripts and created a matrix for each one, I used a cross case and a within case analysis deriving themes and changes over time from the data.

Reliability & Validity

Based on suggestions for addressing reliability and validity by Moon and Trepper (1996), I implemented the following procedures. First, I read each transcript twice to insure that I did not exclude any data that pertained to the grieving process and the information I did record in the matrix was accurate. Second, I utilized a second coder to further insure that the information recorded in the matrices was accurate, as well as to help validate any observed themes. We read each transcript and completed the matrix independently but met after each transcript to discuss the matrix and our observations. Once the matrices were completed and independently reviewed for overarching themes, we then met once again to discuss these themes and to see if we both deducted the same conclusions from the data.
To help account for any biases that I might have had while analyzing the data, I implemented two approaches. First, I used the transcendental phenomenological reduction approach for this study. Moustakas (1994) argues that when studying a phenomenon we often have preconceived notions and biases that may lead us to focus on certain aspects of a phenomenon while overlooking other potentially valuable details. In order to reduce my biases or the amount of preconceived ideas I had about this phenomenon of grief related to military families, I abstained from conducting a literature review until after the data analysis was completed. I was concerned that by reading about the different models and theories related to grief as well as research findings that this would influence how I saw and described the parents’ grief process. This also addressed the possibility that I would be only be focusing on the data that fit with the existing literature or model of grief while overlooking other interesting data that might be of value.

A second method I utilized to help account for my biases was to use bracketing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Bracketing entails writing down what one already knows about the phenomenon as well as any preconceived notions that one might have. Thus, prior to beginning the data analysis, I documented what I knew about grief and my preconceived notions (see Appendix A). Upon completing my data analysis, I reviewed this document to see if my biases had influenced my description of the parent’s grief process in any way. I concluded that it did not influence my findings.
Research Question

My overarching research question is:

1. Explore and describe the grieving process of two parents who lost their adult child to military combat.

Results

From analyses of the interviews, four major themes emerged that help illustrate the parents grieving process. These four themes are: coping, support, stressors, and grieving process over time.

Coping

Although the parents used each other as a form of support to cope with the loss of their son, they had very different individualized ways of coping. Both parents reported crying a lot and feeling emotionally drained. However, this was the only coping strategy that was consistent between the two. The father had a very avoidant approach in dealing with his son’s passing, whereas the mother had a very engaging style of coping.

The father’s avoidant approach consisted of trying to escape thinking about his loss and memories of his son. The father stated, “That’s the hard part. You start thinking. If your mind is on something else it doesn’t have time to start reflecting and bringing up memories.” When the father did become upset or begin thinking about his loss he often withdrew from others and sought out places of solitude to be alone with his thoughts and emotions. The father stated, “I just had to get away. I just had to leave.”

The mother’s coping style tended to be more engaging, where she would allow herself to think about her son and experience her emotions. The mother seemed to expend a lot of effort to keep a connection with her deceased son and keep his memory
alive. The mother said, “Just that tie to (Reservist) is still there.” When she became emotionally upset she often sought out material items such as photo albums, home movies, son’s personal belongings as a way to help her cope with her thoughts and emotions. Having a tangible object that was connected to her son around for her to demonstrate physical affection to seemed to help her cope with the loss. (Reservist’s) military unit gave the mother a large teddy bear at her son’s funeral. The mother stated, “The bears were gifts at the funeral. The big one is from his Unit so I hug them a lot.” The mother also mentioned that her son left behind a dog and a truck that provide comfort to her. The interviewer asked, “What ways do you personally and privately deal with it (the loss)?” The mother replied, “The dogs you met out there. One of them is his so you go out and you pet her. And I drive his truck it’s mine now so uh, talk to him a lot out there.”

The mother also used photos and video of her son to help maintain her son’s presence when she began to miss him. For example, the mother said, “I pull out pictures and I pull the DVD’s out and kind of watch those. And I do a lot of crying and I do feel better afterwards, just having that.” Viewing her son engaging in basic aspects of life seemed to make it easier for the mother to construct a psychological presence of her son. The mothered stated, “We have a couple of DVD’s that his friend made that show (Reservist) over there talking, walking, and working.” The use of visual stimuli (pictures/video) in which her son is alive, seemed to help her keep her son psychologically present in her life.

The mother also used her son’s friends and fellow soldiers to help her maintain a psychological presence of her son. The mother remarked about spending time with her
son’s military unit, “I look at them like another link to stay close to (Reservist) by staying in the group.” Spending time with these soldiers seemed to fulfill the same purpose as the photos and videos did in which they served as a living, tangible reminder to the mother of her son’s life.

In contrast to the mother’s strong need to maintain a psychological presence of her deceased son, the father did not seem to have the same need. The father seemed to have a different attitude about the passing of his son. Regarding the loss of his son the father stated, “Well that’s the way it is you know and your not going to change it or it’s always going to be that way and you move on.” The father clearly dealt with the death of his son differently than his wife and he did not have the emotional need to develop a psychological presence of his son.

The couple also appeared to have different perspectives on how they viewed the loss of their son and coming to terms with his death. In regards to his son’s death the father stated, “You just don’t get a winning hand or things aren’t dealt fairly. Its just, you just have to suck it up and move on.” The father seemed to be more comfortable with accepting things out of his control. However, the mother seemed to seek answers to her loss by asking God questions. The mother mentioned, “Talking to God trying to figure out why it was (Reservist), because most of the time (Reservist) was the driver he wasn’t the passenger. And this particular day he was the passenger.”

Although the death of their son was a result of military service, the parents reported not feeling any hatred for or holding any grievance against the United States Government or the United States Military. The father reported having strong support for Operation Iraqi Freedom and the American Troops who serve. The father stated,
I still support our efforts over there and in my view point, I don’t really care about the weapons of mass destruction, it was about time somebody put their foot down and said, “Enough is enough.” I would be very disgusted if they all of a sudden pulled troops out not just for my son but for every other solder that has died and sacrificed.

Support

Following the loss of their son, the parents received support from a variety of sources. These sources were the Reservist’s Unit, the other spouse, and the community. These forms of support were reported by the parents to provide emotional support in coping with the death of their son.

Reservist’s Unit Support. The parents felt a strong bond to their son’s military unit both before and after his death. Upon the unit’s deployment, the couple volunteered to be the unit’s family support group leaders. This leadership position allowed the parents to become very connected with the other soldiers and their families. This already established connection with the unit proved to be a strong source of support after the death of their son. Over time the parents began to view the military unit more as part of their family. The mother stated, “We told them (troops in son’s military unit) at the time of Reservist’s death that we now looked at them as our sons and daughters.”

The military unit also seemed to help provide the parents with a sense a closure regarding their son’s death. The father mentioned,

We asked some of (Reservist’s) closest buddies (in the son’s military unit) to meet us at the legion. And we had some drinks, some beers and had some pizza and stuff and just talked. And uh, they really gave us some insight on some stories and it was uh rambunctious.
The parents knew very little about the work and leisure activities of their son in Iraq. This interaction with the troops seemed to give the parents a different perspective on their son. The stories that the troops shared with the parents seemed to help them understand who their son was during his tour in Iraq and in turn helped the parents handle their son’s passing. The interviewer asked the father, “So did you find the evening healing in some way?” The father replied, “I think that it was, yea.”

Spousal Support. Both the mother and the father stated that their spouse contributed ample support in coping with the loss of their son. What seemed to help this couple support each other was an alternation of the stronger role in the relationship. When one of the parents was having a hard time coping with the death of their son, the other parent seemed to be having a better day coping with the loss. When asked about spousal support the mother responded, “(Spouse) and I have our good days and bad days and it works where it seems like I have a bad day he has a good day and vise versa.” Both parents reported that their partner was their biggest source of support following the loss of their son. The husband remarked about spousal support,

Just go on…Uh….Cry. Sometimes, she thinks something, or something gets to her and she gets emotional that sometimes it, it doesn’t bother me and vise versa we work off one another sometimes it you know when I’m emotional about something she’s not.

Community Support. The parents did report receiving support from neighbors and the surrounding community. The community seemed to respond to the death of the Reservist with more tangible gifts, rather than emotional support. The mother remarked, “Lots of support from the neighborhood. Especially when (Reservist) died they really came out. Asking how we were to sending care packages.” The father also commented, “We continue to get cards from community members, friends.” The father also reported that
the support he received from the supervisors and staff at his place of employment helped in dealing with his son’s death. The father stated:

One thing about my company, my supervisor and department at this time um, If I’ve wanted to stay home because emotionally I’m not in the mood. I just call and my supervisor says “No problem and you don’t have to say another word.

Stressors

One of the biggest stressors that the parents shared was the homecoming of their son’s military unit. Both parents reported wanting to go and see the troops return home and show their support for them; however they felt torn. The parents did not want to upset the returning troops with their presence there. The parents felt that the troops’ returning home should be a joyous occasion and they worried that their presence would dampen the festivities and bring undue focus on their deceased son. The father stated:

We were happy to see those guys back. Happy to be a part of it! We were kind of torn between whether we should go down there or not. We didn’t want to make a spectacle of ourselves, but yet we wanted to let them know that we were still right there with them.

Both parents mentioned that the holidays without the Reservist were especially difficult. The parents reported that the holiday season was the hardest time of the year without their son. The interviewer asked, “What has been the most stressful?” The mother replied, “The first set of holidays without (Reservist). It’s been kinda stressful.” The father stated that the holiday season was even more difficult than the anniversary of his son’s death. The father mentioned, “I’d have to say Christmas was more of the low point of the…year without him.” The interviewer asked,” So the holidays was the hardest. The anniversary wasn’t as bad?” The father responded, “Yea.”
**Grieving Process Over Time**

Over the course of the year following the loss of their son, the parents reported that the intensity of their grief had lessened. The father reported that coping with the loss of his son became easier from the first interview to the second interview. “The father stated, “It might be getting easier to some degree.” After a year had passed the parents continued to work through the stress of losing their son; however the stress had become less intense. Despite the diminished intensity of stress on the parents, their son was still at the forefront of their thoughts. The mother stated a year after her son’s death, “Everything is still kind of (Reservist) oriented, kind of leans that way.” The mother still experienced little reminders of their son like hitting an emotional nerve on occasion. The mother stated:

You’re just kind of going along your normal day and then, boom, here comes a song, a smell, you know something, even looking in my side mirror and seeing the front of a truck that looks like (Reservist’s), you know, nope it’s not him. It is always something.

The father reported things being less emotional a year after his son’s death, “The days are easier, less emotional.”

Both parents mentioned the grief of their son may never end and the father spoke of how he wants his grief to never completely end. The father stated:

I don’t think it will ever end (his grief), um totally. I hope it never does. The frequency, the intensity, has diminished. Um, but yea, I don’t think it ever will. And I emphasize I hope it never does.

The interviewer replied by asking the father, “Kind of keep him alive in spirit.” The father responded, “Yea, definitely.” The mother stated, “I think I’ll be grieving the rest of my life, but to what degree I don’t know.”
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine and describe the grieving process of two parents who had lost their son to military combat. The parents seem to have had similar and different experiences in grieving the loss of their son. Rando (1986) found that mothers and fathers tend to have different coping strategies and experience different emotions after the loss of an adult child. This is consistent with our findings in which the parents exhibited very different coping strategies and emotions. Rando (1986) found that after the loss of an adult child mothers tend to experience anger, despair, and depersonalization and fathers experience isolation, desolation, a loss of control, and a fear of death. The father at times in this study did show signs of isolation after the loss of his son. The father demonstrated avoidance when the stress of the loss became too great and would remove himself from the situation. However, the mother’s coping strategies were not consistent with Rando’s (1986) findings. The mother tried to maintain a very personal relationship with her deceased son. When the stress of the loss became overwhelming the mother would surround herself with memories of her son such as videos, pictures, and objects that represented her son’s life as opposed to depersonalizing her son.

Fish (1986) states that people often compare grief to a medical injury that will heal over time; like dismemberment, parents never heal from the loss of an adult child; they gradually must accept the pain. Fish (1986) also mentions that this pain felt by the parent fluctuates in intensity and changes over time but, does not diminish and never disappears. This is consistent to what the parents in this study reported feeling. Although, for both parents, the intensity of their grief appeared to have lessened over time, both
reported still thinking of their son a year after his death. The parents also mentioned that they never thought they would be done grieving his death.

Ronel and Lebel’s (2006) study examining grief reactions in Middle Eastern parents who lost their adult child to combat found that the parents had become angry at the government and political leaders of their country following the death of their son. This was not the case with the parents in this study. Neither parent in this study showed hostile feelings toward the United States Government, political leaders, or Armed Forces after their son’s death. Rather than hostility the parents in this study conveyed support for both the United States Armed Forces and Operation Iraqi Freedom both before and after the loss of their son.

For the parents in this study, the members of their son’s reserve unit appeared to provide a huge source of support for the parents. Through the parents being able to talk with their son’s fellow soldiers and find out what the last few days of their son’s life were like as well as details surrounding their son’s death seemed to help provide the parents’ with some closure. However, these parents were the leaders of the unit’s family support group and had an established relationship with these soldiers and their parents prior to their son’s death. Thus, this position of leadership could have been the reason the parents received so much support from the reserve unit and may not be typical of other parents.

This study sought to examine and describe a phenomenon that has rarely been studied, that of grieving military parents. This study’s sample consisted of only two parents and therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other parents. In addition, this study was a secondary data analysis in which the interview questions did not focus on the grieving process in as much depth as I would have liked. There were statements that the
parents had made that I thought could have been explored further to better understand their experiences. Finally, because I did not either conduct the interviews or meet the parents, I lacked a context (home environment, community, physical appearance) in which to place the parents’ statements; therefore, my description of the parent’s grieving process may be skewed.

Future research studies examining the grieving process of military parents should consist of a larger sample size to help delineate any common themes across parents. Future studies should consider using a mixed method study to try to quantify the intensity of stress and emotional reactions the parents experience, as well as to obtain rich descriptive detail of the parental grieving process. The deceased soldier (son) in this study was enlisted in a Army Reserve unit; future studies should consider including parents from other branches of service including parents of active military personnel.

In conclusion, this study described the grieving process of two parents who lost their son in military combat during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Four main themes emerged from the data: coping strategies, sources of support, stressors, and grief over time. Further research is needed to better understand the grieving process of military parents so as to better assist this growing population through support groups, counseling, and psychoeducational literature.
References


Appendix A

I believe that there are five stages of grief: denial, depression, anger, bargaining, and acceptance. These stages can be applied to a person that is facing their own mortality or people that are close to someone who has died or is dying. Personally I have never felt grief due to the death of a friend or loved one. The only personal experience that I have with the grieving process is through secondary accounts by observing my friends grieve over the passing of someone close to them. Through these observations of my friends I found that their grief was more intense during the first year of losing a loved one. People that I have spoken too have indicated that as time passes the grief subsides but never dissolves completely. I speculate that the military culture will affect the grieving process of military parents grieving the loss of a son killed in combat. I think that the military culture will serve as a support system for the parents and help them cope with their grief in a positive way.

I do have personal experience with military life due to my family history. My grandfather served overseas during the Korean War and my father served in the Navy for 21 years. I spent two years of my college career participating in the Air Force ROTC program. As result of being raised by a military father I have always had a very high respect for men and women serving in our Armed Forces. As I furthered my academic career this respect developed into curiosity and interest in how the military lifestyle affected the dynamics of the family system.