

Complicated Spiritual Grief II: A Deductive Inquiry Following the Loss of a Loved One

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Recent studies have revealed an association between *complicated grief*—a severe, prolonged response to the loss of a loved one—and *complicated spiritual grief*—a spiritual crisis following loss. Furthermore, bereavement research has benefitted from a number of studies using qualitative inquiry as a means of examining the experiences of individuals grieving a variety of types of losses. However, a gap in the literature remains in terms of the qualitative investigation of spiritual struggle following loss. Thus, using participants' written responses to open-ended questions along with systematic exploration of this topic with a five-member focus group, we designed this qualitative study to better understand the firsthand experiences of bereaved individuals who have suffered a crisis of faith after the death of a loved one. Specifically, our directed content analysis of bereaved focus group members' responses revealed 17 different common and salient themes subsumed in an overarching narrative of resentment and doubt toward God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in the bereaved person's spiritual beliefs and behaviors. Thus, our study clarified the construct of complicated spiritual grief, and laid the groundwork for development of more specific assessment and treatment of this condition.

Although grieving is a common human experience following the loss of a loved one, in recent years, bereavement research has focused increased attention

on potential risk factors affecting the grief trajectory of bereaved individuals (Burke & Neimeyer, 2012; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). In part, this amplified concern stems from the prevalence of *complicated grief* (CG; Prigerson et al., 1995; Shear, Simon, Wall, Zisook, Neimeyer, et al., 2011)—also termed *prolonged grief disorder* (PGD; Prigerson et al., 2009), a protracted, incapacitating, and sometimes life-threatening response to the loss of a primary attachment figure. Although a substantial number of resilient mourners report that following the death of their loved one they were able to quickly maneuver through their grief with little in

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the way of psychological distress (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001), and although other mourners state that the majority of their grief symptoms subside within 1 to 2 years (Bonanno & Mancini, 2006), a subset of grievers reportedly suffers tremendously. Approximately 10–15% of the bereaved population suffer from CG, with substantially higher rates occurring in samples of violent death survivors (i.e., homicide, suicide, or fatal accident; e.g., McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, Williams, & Lawson, 2012; Mitchell, Kim, Prigerson, & Mortimer-Stephens, 2004).

A less understood, yet similarly disconcerting outcome of bereavement called *complicated spiritual grief* (CSG; Shear et al., 2006) also has become a focal point of grief research in recent years (Burke & Neimeyer, 2013; Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-Murphy, Ippolito, & Roberts, 2011; Lichtenthal, Burke, & Neimeyer, 2011). CSG is a spiritual crisis following loss, reflected in the bereaved individual's sense of discord, conflict, and distance from God, and/or from members of his or her spiritual community. A growing body of research has established a link between CG and CSG, specifically suggesting that CG prospectively predicts the development of CSG (Burke et al., 2011), does so even when controlling for other forms of bereavement distress (i.e., PTSD and depression; Neimeyer & Burke, 2011), and does so in diverse samples when related background variables including type of death are held constant (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014, this issue).

The goal of the present study is to further investigate these deleterious outcomes in a diverse sample of mourners who have experienced a variety of types of losses and to provide a closer qualitative examination of CSG to contribute a more refined evaluation of this condition. Burke and Neimeyer's (2013; see this issue) quantitative investigation of CG and CSG in the context of violent death loss forms the basis for this study's protocol.

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IN BEREAVEMENT

Straightforward, meaningful interviews with bereaved individuals are the crux of qualitative inquiry and are critical to understanding the individual griever's experience. Bereavement literature has benefitted substantially from the results of qualitative research, as have bereaved individuals from sharing their personal narratives of loss (Buckle, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2010). Such studies have spanned a variety of aspects of grieving and incorporated a number of samples, including older adults (Damianakis & Marziali, 2012), bereaved nurses (Shinbara & Olson, 2010), widows (Rosenbaum, 1991), and caregivers of terminally ill patients (Sanders & Corley, 2003). Investigators

of parental bereavement also have recognized the advantages inherent in hearing directly from grieving mothers and fathers (Armentrout, 2009; Arnold & Gemma, 2008; Gudmundsdottir, 2006), with some studies highlighting the couple's struggle specifically (Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, 2011), or incorporating a sibling's perspective to understand the effect of loss on the family as a whole (Thompson et al., 2011; Rosenblatt, 2005).

Furthermore, several qualitative studies have explored the African American grief experience (e.g., Van & Meleis, 2003). For example, Laurie and Neimeyer (2010) systematically reviewed 48 slave narratives and discovered themes surrounding a loss of hope and identity, dehumanization, witnessing/experiencing violence, living in deprivation and fear, and the agonizing deaths of family members. Finally, several case studies have captured a narrated grief experience, including Hooghe et al.'s (2010) exploration of a bereaved couple's grief after the loss of their infant child, Kelly's (1991) account of an 83-year-old widow's struggle to accommodate her loss 12 years later; and Piazza Bonin, Neimeyer, Burke, Young, and McDevitt-Murphy's (2013) report of disenfranchised grief in an African American mother whose young-adult son was murdered.

Thus, qualitative inquiry has proved a necessary part of the exploration of grief, not merely an add-on, and yet, despite these contributions, there is a gap in the qualitative bereavement literature in relation to the topic of spiritual crisis following loss, and the association between CG and CSG, specifically. This deficit in knowing how bereaved individuals struggle spiritually by asking them to share their experiences in their own words is what prompted our current examination. Thus, in this study, we sought to understand phenomenologically the experience of spiritual crisis in the lives of grievers through the qualitative analysis of participants' written narratives in response to open-ended questions and a focus group session that expounded upon them.

METHOD

Participants

We collected data from several samples of bereaved adults who were diverse in terms of ethnicity, type of loss, and church affiliation, and who met the following inclusion criteria: 18 years old or older, endorsement of the Christian faith tradition, and bereaved within the past 10 years (with a mean postloss duration of just under 3.5 years ($M = 40.6$ months; $SD = 2.6$ months)). Complete protocol details are outlined in our companion study (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014, this issue).

Procedures

Qualitative Analysis Plan

Our qualitative inquiry assisted us in obtaining a rich description of the construct of spiritual struggle in grief. To develop the focus group protocol, and participant eligibility, we analyzed data from 84 individuals who had participated in the assessment sessions. We used a four-item, open-ended questionnaire to encourage participants to think about how they felt during the times when they struggled most deeply with the loss of their loved one and, specifically, to describe how the loss challenged their relationship with God and their faith community:

1. What feelings or thoughts about God or your relationship with Him did you have following the loss of your loved one?
2. Please discuss the ways in which the loss strengthened or challenged your relationship with God.
3. What feelings or thoughts about your faith community or your relationship with it did you have following the loss of your loved one?
4. Please discuss the ways in which the loss strengthened or challenged your relationship with your faith community.

Questionnaire Narrative Analysis

In relation to CSG, we developed an a priori coding scheme to analyze and report key concepts in the questionnaire narratives. We used *directed content analysis*—the deductive use of existing theory or prior research to better understand a previously explored phenomenon and establish key concepts or variables as initial coding categories (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999)—to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Specifically, we referred to quantitative items representing spiritual distress found on measures used in this study (i.e., negative religious coping or NRC subscale of the Brief RCOPE; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) and Discontent subscale of the Religious Coping and Activities Scale; Pargament, Ensing, Falgout, & Olsen, 1990; see Burke & Neimeyer, 2014, this issue) to determine the presence of spiritual crisis in the participant’s responses. Example quantitative items include “Wondered whether God had abandoned me” or “Felt angry with or distant from God or the members of the church.” We used quantitative items as our criteria to guide decision making. Thus, we highlighted and coded text from participants whose narrative on the open-ended questionnaire broadly reflected spiritual crisis based on our analytical criteria. These individuals were eligible to participate in the subsequent focus group session. Participant narratives that appeared to indicate

spiritual crisis but did not align closely with our pre-existing heuristic were assigned a new code (e.g., see Appendix B, 1.2.a.1, 2.1.a, 2.1.c, 3.2, 3.5). These individuals were eligible to participate in the focus group as well.

Consistent with prior research (Exline & Rose, 2005), we found that spiritual struggle was a fairly common experience among church-goers in our study. Overall, 36 out of 84 participants (43%) endorsed CSG on the qualitative questionnaire. Of these, 20 out of 36 participants (56%) endorsed CSG at least once in relation to both God and their spiritual community, and 10 out of 36 (26%) participants endorsed CSG in at least three of four questions. Nine out of 84 individuals (11%) endorsed CSG on both qualitative and quantitative assessments (see Burke & Neimeyer, 2013, this issue).

Focus Group

The purpose of a focus group is to gain insight from individuals in a target group about a specific subject, construct, or phenomenon by asking questions that elicit a variety of experiences related to their understanding, attitudes, perceptions, and ideas (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). Benefits of focus groups include the ease of interviewing multiple people simultaneously to hear their varying perspectives, and prompting reactions from group members who respond to or build on one another’s contributions.

We recruited focus group members based on their endorsement of CSG from quantitative scales (e.g., the NRC subscale of the Brief RCOPE or the Discontent subscale of the RCA; see Burke & Neimeyer, 2014, this issue) and their narrative responses to the qualitative questionnaire. Individuals who endorsed high levels of spiritual crisis (1 *SD* above the mean) quantitatively, on either the NRC subscale (i.e., scores >8.16) or on the Discontent subscale (i.e., scores >3.55) were considered as potential focus group members. We selected the 10 individuals who endorsed three to four questions qualitatively and who met CSG criteria quantitatively, first, and then randomly selected the remaining members from the cohort who endorsed CSG at least once in both categories on the qualitative questionnaire, using an online number randomizer (Urbaniak & Plous, 2011). Of 15 invited participants, five individuals gave phone consent to participate in a focus group lasting approximately 60 min. Ten potential participants did not participate for reasons that included being too busy, too ill, or unavailable.

Focus Group Participants

Here we have included background characteristics for the five focus group members, using pseudonyms to protect their identity:

Elaine is a 65-year-old African American woman who lost her 24-year-old son to homicide 6 years prior. She

was in contact with him on a daily basis but was not present when he was murdered or when his body was found. Elaine is married, employed full-time, has an annual income of between \$10,000–24,999, and is most closely affiliated with a Baptist denomination. Her CG scores were above the mean for our sample (ICG-R = 71); however, her PRC (positive religious coping, as assessed using the Brief RCOPE PRC subscale; Pargament, et al., 1998) and CSG scores were lower than the mean (PRC = 6; NRC = 2; Discontent = 1).

Latisha is a 36-year-old African American woman who lost her 69-year-old grandmother to natural, anticipated causes 9 months prior. She was in contact with her grandmother on a monthly basis but was not present when she died. Latisha is married, currently unemployed but looking for work, has an annual income of between \$10,000–24,999, and is most closely affiliated with a nondenominational church. Her CG, PRC, and CSG scores all were below the mean for our sample (ICG-R = 49; PRC = 13; NRC = 2; Discontent = 1; see Burke & Neimeyer, 2014, Table 1, this issue, for mean scores on quantitative measures).

Rhonda is a 23-year-old Caucasian woman who lost her 55-year-old mother to natural, sudden causes 8 months prior. She was in contact with her mother on a daily basis but was not present when the doctors pronounced her dead. Rhonda is single, unemployed but looking for work, has an annual income of less than \$10,000, and is most closely affiliated with a nondenominational church. Her CG, PRC, and Discontent scores were above the mean for our sample (ICG-R = 58; PRC = 19; Discontent = 3); however, her NRC scores were below the mean (NRC = 2).

Caroline is a 59-year-old African American widow who lost her 55-year-old husband to homicide 3 years prior. She was in daily contact with him and was present when he was murdered. Caroline is widowed, employed full-time, has an annual income of between \$75,000–99,999, and is affiliated with a Baptist denomination. Her CG, PRC, and CSG scores were all above the mean for our sample (ICG-R = 111; PRC = 18; NRC = 6; Discontent = 2).

Suzanne is a 19-year-old Caucasian woman who lost her 68-year-old grandmother to accidental causes 7 years prior. She saw her grandmother on a weekly basis, however she was not present when she died nor when her body was found. Suzanne is single, employed part-time, has an annual income of less than \$10,000, and did not specify a church denomination. Her CG and PRC scores were below the mean for our sample (ICG-R = 51; PRC = 12); however, her CSG scores were well above the mean (NRC = 18; Discontent = 7).

Focus Group Questions

According to Mayring's (2000) method of deductive category application, previous theory or research assists in establishing research questions as well as the initial coding system. We used our quantitative and qualitative findings to inform our semi-structured focus group questions (see Appendix A) and to aid in creating a coding scheme. Thus, after focus group members gave informed consent, we inquired about their loss-related spiritual experiences, questioned if our findings about spiritual crisis in bereavement resonated with them, and invited them to share what had helped them or what they believed might help others. These tape-recorded discussions were then transcribed and analyzed.

Focus Group Structure

Two masters-level clinicians facilitated the focus group discussion, which was held in a small university classroom. Focus group members were given explanations and instructions related to group protocol (e.g., the structure of the meeting, issues of confidentiality), the purpose of the study (i.e., to enable us to learn about their spiritual experiences following loss), expressly emphasizing that this was not a support group meeting. In relation to our questions, participants were allowed to respond freely, with no pressure to respond or to limit participation; however, individuals who responded less often were specifically invited to contribute more, if they so desired. Although the focus group was diverse in a variety of ways (e.g., age, race, socioeconomic status, church affiliation, type of loss), the conversational climate was supportive.

Narrative Analysis and Results

Six of the 15 questions asked of the focus group elicited responses indicative of spiritual struggle in relation to God, six in relation to the spiritual community, and one related to members' perception of why some bereaved people walk away from God. Following multiple close readings of the focus group transcripts, the first author (Laurie A. Burke) color-coded broad categories, focusing the present study exclusively on the analysis of maladaptive spiritual responses, hereafter referred to as CSG.

We assigned codes to all text illustrating members' experiences of spiritual crisis within bereavement, with each conversational turn considered one unit for analysis. We began by using the same coding scheme as in the analyses of the qualitative questionnaire responses but assigned a different code to any text that could not be categorized within the original coding scheme. This doubled the number of codes, reflecting the greater richness and elaboration of the spoken over written

responses. Three additional coders tested the modified coding scheme, each adjusting it as necessary. They then applied the scheme to the same 20% of the data and achieved >80% interrater reliability using the final coding scheme (see Appendix B).

Our results revealed that as a result of the loss, focus group members' overarching narrative was one of resentment and doubt toward God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in their spiritual beliefs and behaviors. Within this narrative of loss, 17 specific themes emerged relative to CSG. The most common themes (i.e., those that emerged repeatedly in the data of multiple participants; $n=6$) and the salient themes (i.e., concepts or experiences that were striking or unexpected; $n=11$), along with sub-themes and response frequencies of each are highlighted below and in Appendix B. The six most common themes included the following:

Questioning God's character (15 responses; see Appendix B, 1.3). A weakened faith in God following loss can cause one to question God's character—his goodness, caring, intentions, and reasoning. For instance, when asked what feelings of confusion they had experienced in relation to God's character (see Question 1), Caroline, whose husband had been abducted and shot at close range, responded

As weird or as tragic or as terrible as it was, how could that be the best thing for me? In terms of my life, how could that be the best thing, for me to have him taken like that? So, I struggle with that, and the future . . . That's not my future anymore, so what is my future supposed to be?

Similarly, in response to the sudden, unexpected loss of her mother, Rhonda said,

[I questioned] God's intentions and everything . . . So much of my confusion had to do with what I saw as my mom's potential in the future. She was a very strong mentor . . . working with some ministries and she was thinking of trying to do something on her own. So, [I questioned] God's intentions as related to my perception of those things.

When asked how their experience caused them to question God's Word or their own faith (see Question 4), Caroline responded:

My problem was that, I would go back to the scripture where it states, "All things work together for the good of me," and I couldn't understand how, how can this be good for me? You know, this is terrible! This is awful! How can this be good for me? My husband and I were just out walking our dog one morning and these guys decided they wanted to rob us, and he fought back

and they shot him! They didn't shoot me, but then I was just left there. So, I was confused, trying to understand why. You know, *why* he died, and *why* I lived. *Why* did it even have to happen at all? *Why* did God think I could live without Ronald?!

Finally, Latisha simply stated,

[God] *let* this happen.

Negative feelings toward God (16 responses; see Appendix B, 2.2). Negative perceptions and feelings in relation to God often emerge in the form of anger and confusion, leaving the griever devastated and shocked. Focus group participants were asked to respond to the question: "People commonly report feeling angry or betrayed following loss. How was this true for you?" (see Question 2). Rhonda confessed,

I've come to terms with [my mom's death] now, but I can remember, I was just kind of mad at God, I hate to say that, but . . .

Suzanne added,

I was, like, bewildered or just couldn't understand or just couldn't even put a word to describe the way that I, I felt. Yeah, I was like *in shock*, you know, basically just, just in shock.

Elaine, who lost her oldest son to homicide, poignantly stated,

I'm not angry, I'm devastated! I'm *so, so* devastated.

Lack of spiritual sense making (13 responses; see Appendix B, 2.4). Some bereaved individuals struggle to make spiritual sense of their loss, often because their constructs or assumptions about God or life have been shattered as a result. In response to questioning aspects of God's character (see Question 1), 23-year-old Rhonda, who unexpectedly lost her mother 8 months prior, simply said,

[It] still doesn't make sense and I'm still struggling with that.

Fifty-nine-year-old Caroline expressed it this way:

I guess my biggest problem is that I had, I thought I had my life all figured out . . . he and I retiring and being with each other, that was, that was gonna be our future. But instead, I felt like I was robbed of my future. And my daughter said, "Well, just get a new future! You know, just get a new one." But, it's *not* that easy!

Misunderstood by spiritual community (eight responses; see Appendix B, 3.3). Well-intentioned yet

fallible support can cause griever to feel misunderstood by their spiritual community, especially when would-be supporters respond to their grief with invalidating clichés or questions. The focus group members' narratives were rife with examples of hackneyed answers from fellow congregants that left them feeling misunderstood and isolated. Caroline not only shared how the loss of her spouse challenged her reliance upon God (see Question 5), but also the platitudinous phrases she received from the church in the wake of her grief:

People will say, "Oh, just depend on the Lord and *He'll* send you a husband!"

Negative feelings about spiritual community (four responses; see Appendix B, 3.5.b). Spiritually inclined grievers can have negative perceptions and feelings in relation to the spiritual community, specifically when they feel judged or condemned for being angry at or questioning God following their loss. When survivors were asked if they had felt abandoned by their spiritual community who may have indicated that they had grieved too long (see Question 8), Elaine responded,

Well, [not long after my son's death] my pastor said, "I look at you and sometimes you look so sad." I said, "My *son* is dead!" He asked me, "Are you angry with God?" I said, "No. I'm *devastated!* And I'm disappointed." And, he said, "Well, don't let this be what takes you outta here." *That* was a blow. As far as he was concerned, I cut him off!

We specifically asked focus group members if they felt angry or betrayed following their loss (see Question 2). Rhonda shared her experience of feeling judged:

Some of my friends, they would look at me weird if I told them that [I had cussed God out].

And others chimed in:

We don't like to admit that we get angry at God. I think people would condemn us if we say that, so we don't.

Selective about sharing feelings (13 responses; see Appendix B, 3.7). Overall, mourners expressed a sense of frustration with the support received from their fellow church members, making them selective about who they share their feelings with or reluctant to show their true feelings because they feared receiving still greater hurt as a result. Group members endorsed negative emotions about being misunderstood and neglected, which subsequently caused them to withdraw from their spiritual community (see Questions 10 and 11). Latisha told us,

Things and words of comfort that people think that they're giving, it's frustrating because it's *not* [comforting] and you, you don't really want to say, well, that's *not* helpful so please stop talking.

Caroline added,

I think the reason I withdrew some during those times maybe wasn't so much so I could take care of me. It was more directly because "I'm tired of you people," or because I didn't want to be very close to what brought such frustration.

Beyond the themes that commonly were endorsed by most members of the focus group over the course of the interview, a number of other less common, yet salient themes were striking and unexpected because of the level of distress and degree of passion expressed. These include the following.

Spiritual crisis coupled with strong faith (two responses; see Appendix B, 1.5.f). A weakened faith in God that eventuates in a spiritual crisis also can be coupled with a strong faith that is not always realized or appreciated by one's spiritual community. For example, in response to being asked about feelings of abandonment by the spiritual community, perhaps because they thought the individual had grieved too long (see Question 8), Rhonda, who was grieving the loss of her mother to a sudden, nonviolent death, described her dad's experience:

[Church members] would tell him "Hey, you know, it's been [long] enough," despite the fact that in all of his pain he *still* said that "God is good, regardless." So, even though my dad is simply being honest and he hurts like hell, he is also very frustrated and confused, because even when he tells them "I know that God is true," they *still* give those reactions.

Betrayed and robbed (two responses; see Appendix B, 2.1.a, 2.1.c). Betrayal, and a sense of feeling robbed following loss are sometimes related to grievers feeling that their spiritual community lied to them about God's character. In response to the following question: "As a result of your loss, are you more self-reliant—do you rely less on God and more on yourself?" (see Question 6), Suzanne responded,

Well, my family's really religious, so when [my grandmother died unexpectedly] I was just like "*What?!*" "I thought we were good!" [She] just died out of nowhere! Just like that, she was just taken away from this earth. I was just mad about that, because when I was young my parents were always like, "You know, God is good, God is good." I didn't know how to deal with that. I was like,

“Well, I thought you said ‘God is *good*?’” But that just made me, like, shocked. I was like “Well no, y’all are lying!” I told my parents, “You are lying. He is *not* good!” I mean, I wasn’t fooled into thinking He’s good when He’s not!

Questioning what they did to cause death (one response; see Appendix B, 2.3). For some bereaved individuals, spiritual crisis is tied to a questioning of what they or their deceased loved one did to cause or deserve death. Recalling how her husband was shot at pointblank range in front of her, and her resultant spiritual confusion (see Question 1), Caroline exclaimed,

So, I was just confused as to *why*, why it had to happen. Was it something *he* did? Was it something *I* did? Is it *punishment* for me? Is it something I have to live with every day because of *something that I did*? I know I, I try and separate that it happened to him, it didn’t really happen to me, but I was right there, so *why* did it happen *to us*?

Desire to hurt God in return (two responses, see Appendix B, 2.7). Feelings of intense anger and cursing at God are sometimes exhibited by the griever as an attempt to hurt God in return for the pain he or she attributes to him. Although now able to laugh as she recalls her experience, when asked specifically about expressions of anger (see Question 2), Elaine unashamedly admitted,

Boy, did I *get angry!* . . . not only did I get angry, I really *cussed God out* a lot of times!

Abandoned by spiritual community (three responses; see Appendix B, 3.1). Distrust in the form of questioning their spiritual community’s beliefs and intentions, and feelings of emotional or physical abandonment or neglect by the spiritual community caused some individuals to go to a new church where they could be anonymous. Grievers endorsed that they sometimes felt invalidated by their community of believers or thought they were insincere (see Question 12). Caroline told us,

I still [keep church members at bay]. You know, I told this one congregant, “Ya’ll don’t know, I got a lot of problems, I’m just *really, really* messed up.” But, I won’t go into that with this one lady minister cause I hear her talk about her faith and how she feels about God. So I don’t discuss my pain and my hurt and my beliefs in scripture with her.

Other mourners reported wishing they could figuratively blend into the woodwork of their church. For example, Caroline shared,

It changed from being there every Sunday, doing this and that, to not being there at all—because they didn’t understand. And I wasn’t even going to go through it. I felt like, if I was there then they would still expect me to be doing all the things that I was doing before and I *couldn’t* do all those things anymore. I needed somebody to minister *to me*. I couldn’t minister to anybody, so I just stopped going. And I went to a church where I was anonymous. Just *anonymous*.

Silent silencers (10 responses; see Appendix B, 3.5.a). Bereaved individuals criticized their spiritual supporters who they felt remained silent about the death (as if it had not happened), placed unrealistic expectations on them, would not let the griever express how he/she felt, tried to convince the griever to think differently, viewed the griever as a victim only, or appeared more concerned about their own comfort than the griever’s pain. Rhonda teared up as she shared the ways her dad’s church friends responded to his grief:

They reacted very, very, very negatively. My parents were married for over 30 years, and only a couple of months after the fact, two people who were supposed to be very close friends, essentially said, “Won’t you *shut up* already? Just get *over it!*” And I think one of them actually used the words “get over it.” So, in that regard . . . I became *quite a bit* more defensive of my family.

Avoided spiritual community (four responses; see Appendix B, 3.2.c). Some grievers avoided their spiritual community in part because they questioned their community’s ability to handle their grief or because they feared that their own painful feelings would not be well received. In relation to the emotions such reactions from their church community elicited in them, Caroline said,

Frustration—because most people don’t know how to deal with grief. It makes them uncomfortable. And so it becomes more about *their* comfort than your pain. And that’s *frustrating* for me because people give you answers or something to make *themselves* feel better, but not, it’s not words of comfort. You know like, “This too shall pass.” Well, that doesn’t really work when . . . there’s a gaping hole in your life from losing this loved one!

Understanding not pity (one response; see Appendix B, 3.8, 3.9). Spiritually inclined grievers expressly stated that they do not want pity from their spiritual community but do need them to try to understand how they feel. When specifically asked, “What kinds of negative emotions (e.g., anger or feelings of numbness) have you felt toward your spiritual community?”

(see Question 9), Latisha seemingly responded on behalf of the whole group:

I want them to understand how I feel, but I don't want their pity. I don't want them to pity me, but I want them to know that I am hurting.

Faith-related changes (five responses; see Appendix B, 4.0). Changes in the griever's faith-related behaviors, activities, and attitudes were expressed in terms of lower levels of church volunteerism, allowing his or her mood to govern levels of participation, or choosing to no longer worship God or fellowship with others at all, choosing not to celebrate religious holidays, and an overall sense of being less faithful (see Question 14). Caroline's described her experience, saying,

During the Sunday service, we have what's called "Kiss of Peace," where everyone embraces each other. When I used to go to church I wished to see everyone, but now I'm just kinda there just for God. So I don't participate in that anymore.

Elaine explained it this way,

At my home church, it's a black church, we have what we call praise and worship . . . and they want everybody to stand up, raise your hands and worship God, they want a whole bunch of noise, holy dance, they want all this stuff. So, I stopped participating in that. That's not in me anymore. I just sit there.

Caroline added,

My husband really loved Christmas . . . but Christmas hurts, so I don't participate in that.

Afterlife concerns (three responses; see Appendix B, 5.0). Concerns related to the afterlife were reflective of spiritual crisis. Specifically, griever's wondered about their loved one's destiny or if they would see him/her again, and questioned the existence of heaven and hell. We found that when focus group members questioned God's Word it led to further questioning of a deeper kind (see Question 4): Caroline explained,

They say, you know, "Absent from the body is present with the Lord," and I was wondering, "Is Ronald present with the Lord?" I *guess* he accepted Christ, but he never went to church with me. He played golf on Sunday, so I'm like, "Are you present with the Lord?" You know, "Am I going to see you again one day?" I didn't know, I just didn't know. I questioned that part . . . You know, *that's* what I want know.

Suzanne, a 19-year-old bereaved granddaughter, shared that she began to question a variety of things after the death:

I started to question heaven and hell. I was like "No, she is just *dead* and I'm never gonna see her again." That's what I thought—it's hard for me to imagine seeing her again somewhere else. So I, you know, I just wasn't as faithful. And, I just have lots of questions like, "Is there a God? Is there a Heaven?"

Lapse of faith (three responses; see Appendix B, 1.2.a). Spiritual crisis that culminates in the bereaved individual walking away from God may represent a temporary or permanent loss of faith—a composite of both overt struggle (e.g., that the person is weak, lacks faith, has a poor knowledge of God or his Word) and hidden strength (e.g., the spiritual crisis might fluctuate, or might not last forever). Despite their spiritual struggles following loss, bereaved focus group members continued to endorse their faith; however, they had much to tell us about why some people do not (see Question 7). Latisha contributed this,

Some of my family and friends have chosen to walk away from God because [their attitude was] "If God was good then he would have healed [their loved one], or this wouldn't have happened."

Rhonda shared,

I had a very good friend who passed away from AIDS. He questioned to his last days why this was happening to him. It was counter to everything he was taught . . . he he questioned what he knew about God, which was the opposite of what he was experiencing.

Ironically, in questioning the faith of jaded others who had suffered tragic loss, some focus group members echoed some of the same responses that troubled them to hear from other members of their own communities. For instance, Suzanne explained that such people

didn't have enough faith. Not enough knowledge of scripture. When I was younger, I didn't know much about God, so I think that's why I just walked away.

And finally, Caroline described it this way,

Maybe not enough [faith] or maybe it was only for a season that they aren't going to have that much faith. You know, maybe in the whole scheme of things they will. It might come back around—trusting God again. It's just *right now* they didn't have enough faith. They just walked away. Walking away from God may not be a *forever* thing. It doesn't mean they're walking away *forever*.

Our analyses also revealed that some themes repeatedly occurred in tandem with others. For instance, when the women in the focus group said that they questioned God's intentions and reasoning (see Appendix B; 1.3.b), they also often admitted having difficulty making spiritual sense of their loss (2.4) and feeling as if their previously held constructs about God or understanding of life had been destroyed as a result (2.6). Individuals who endorsed all three of those sentiments often endorsed negative emotions toward God as well. In other cases, focus group members who doubted God's Word (1.4) also often questioned what they or their loved one did to cause or deserve death (2.3). We also noted with interest that whenever the women in our study perceived negative behaviors stemming from their spiritual supporters (3.5.a), such as supporters placing unrealistic expectations on the griever (3.5.a.3), they always reported multiple (but never single) examples of this (see also 3.5.a.1–3.5.a.8). In addition, we found that individual grievers in our sample differentially responded to our inquiry of their spiritual distress. For example, Caroline, who shared the greatest volume of experiences with us, tended to question God's character more, and frequently reported that her assumptions about life and God were shattered following her loss of her husband Ronald. As a result of their losses, Caroline and Suzanne jointly expressed concerns related to the afterlife—both concerns related to their husband and grandmother, respectively, and concerns more generally related to their once firmly held doctrines. Likewise, both Elaine and Rhonda endorsed negative feelings toward God. Elaine, whose son was murdered during a carjacking, primarily expressed feelings of anger, devastation, and shock. Rhonda, whose mother died suddenly of an unexplained illness, primarily expressed feelings of anger, confusion, and hurt. Notably however, all but one of the participants (Suzanne) told us that they felt silenced by their spiritual community, as if like-minded others could not handle their unconcealed emotion. Perhaps feeling shut down by would-be supporters explains some of the anger that Rhonda and Latisha told us they felt toward them, and might justify their respective adamant decision to select carefully with whom they shared their painful story. Finally, only Suzanne endorsed briefly walking away from God after her grandmother's death. She has since returned to her faith and, like all of the study participants, was attending church at the time of our inquiry.

Member Checking and Triangulation of Results

Upon completing the analysis, we used *member checking*—recontacting a subset of focus group participants to share with them the results in an effort to ensure that our findings captured the essence of what

participants wanted us to know about their experiences. Caroline and Elaine were willing to participate in this way, and both confirmed that our common and salient themes resonated with them and represented the focus group's narratives clearly and sufficiently. Finally, we followed Mays and Pope's (1995) suggestion of triangulating the data, whereby "evidence is deliberately sought from a wide range of different, independent sources and often by different means" (p. 110). Thus, we asked the same questions about CSG using quantitative measures (see Burke & Neimeyer, 2014, this issue), an open-ended questionnaire, and focus group sessions. Thus, the conclusions we have drawn about the nature of spiritual crisis following loss are the composite of multiple means of empirical inquiry.

DISCUSSION

Despite an increasing body of research (Burke et al., 2011; Burke & Neimeyer, 2013; Lichtenthal et al., 2011; Neimeyer & Burke, 2011; Shear et al., 2006) little is known about the relation between CG and CSG. To our knowledge, this study represents one of the first attempts to report the narrative responses of individuals who suffer from CSG. As detailed in the common and salient themes noted above and summarized in Appendix B, their overarching narrative was that the loss created feelings of resentment and distrust of God, discontent with their spiritual community, and significant changes in their faith-related behaviors.

Specifically, focus group narratives highlighted themes of loss-related spiritual distress and abandonment. For example, Rhonda told how her dad felt "emotionally neglected" by their church leaders following the loss of her mother. In her words:

We made a large need known. You know, it wasn't like they didn't know. We made it *clear*. However, they *chose* not to [help].

Conversely, Caroline explained how she left her congregation before church members could outright abandon her.

I just took myself out of . . . the whole situation. I guess I abandoned *them* first.

Responses revealed that although violent death loss predisposed survivors to subsequent spiritual distress, even survivors of natural deaths sometimes suffered a crisis of faith. Results revealed that spiritually inclined grievers who struggled with their faith felt a myriad of emotions relative to God and their faith community. In relation to God, the focus group's feelings can be summed up in terms of *spiritual anguish*—a sense of

traumatization at the ways in which their spiritual lives were devastated by the loss, leaving a residual sense of anger and bewilderment in relation to God. Absorbing such inexplicable pain caused some in our sample to curse God as a way of getting back at him. Conversely, yet consistent with our quantitative findings (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014, this issue), bereaved individuals who struggled spiritually following loss often did so because they felt punished—as if they or their deceased loved one did something that warranted death. Finally, for some, the death elicited significant distress about their loved one's final resting place and an invalidation of core assumptions about the hereafter.

In terms of the faith community, focus group members reported feeling misunderstood, primarily when spiritually like-minded supporters responded to their grief with invalidating platitudes, truisms, and banalities. In addition, they recalled a sense of condemnation and judgment from the very people they looked to for support following a difficult loss. It seems, however, that negative feedback from would-be spiritual supporters was accentuated when griever admitted to being angry at God or having questioned God about the death of their loved one. However, a sense of frustration with the support received seemingly made some focus group contributors more guarded. For instance, a recurrent theme was that substantial discernment was in order when it came to what and with whom grievers would share in terms of their true feelings, primarily out of anticipation that to not differentiate could exacerbate rather than alleviate their psycho-spiritual pain.

Strong emotions surfaced as a result of our questioning. For example, bereaved individuals whose spiritual relationship with their church was in a state of crisis passionately expressed that they felt betrayed, robbed, and lied to. On top of their grief, some reported that mourning was more burdensome and spiritually painful when fellow believers' claims about God's goodness, intention, and reasoning did not mesh with their lived experience. Scrutinizing the spiritual community's beliefs, attitudes, and motives left grievers feeling neglected and fostered a sense of abandonment. Thus, a surprising number of congregants in our study reported that they responded to these experiences by making a fresh start and seeking safety and anonymity in a new church.

Relational avoidance of the spiritual community by the griever was an unanticipated theme arising from our analyses. Participants in the focus group reported that they often avoided fellow church members, primarily because they doubted whether the average congregant would hear their pain or could handle their grief. Thus, to the survivor, avoiding the topic altogether seemed like the only viable option. Frequently, participants characterized fellow congregants as what

we have termed *silent silencers*. On one hand, some in their spiritual support network did not want to acknowledge that the death had occurred or that they were grieving. On the other hand, it was also made clear that something about the way they were expressing their grief was not acceptable. A poignant example came from Suzanne, who lost her grandmother unexpectedly:

At first, a lot of people didn't know what had happened and so when they did, the sense I got from them was, "You know, *please* don't erupt into tears." When I got to the point where I was sharing a little bit more, I could tell they were like, "I would've been satisfied with just a 'fine.' *Don't* keep going." Like, they didn't really want to know. You know, when you ask someone how they're doing, you need to be prepared that they're *not* going to say "okay." But it was clear that [that was not what they wanted to hear.]

Overall, focus group members conveyed that their supporters seemed to place more emphasis on their own comfort and wellbeing than on that of the mourner. In their defense, supporters who feel helpless often ask grief experts, "So, how *can* I help? What *should* I say to someone who is struggling with a loss?" The answers call for creativity on the part of spiritual leaders as they educate their parishioners, especially when juxtaposed with our finding that spiritually inclined grievers do not want to be felt sorry for but, instead, crave like-minded others who try to understand their pain.

In our sample, when both the reality and finality of loss threatened a griever's core constructs, his or her assumptions about God and life were likewise decimated. Thus, a desperate yet unsuccessful attempt to make sense of the loss in spiritual terms ensued. Not surprisingly, such spiritual discontent was often mirrored in changes in the bereaved individual's faith-related behaviors, activities, attitudes, and beliefs. In terms of beliefs, perhaps some of the most concerning are those that involve eternal destiny. Faced with bereavement-related spiritual crisis, even people with a strong belief system sometimes find themselves questioning foundational doctrines such as heaven, hell, and their loved one's eternal salvation.

An unexpected finding was that a spiritual crisis does not necessarily indicate weak or immature faith. Rather, the participants conveyed that, although rarely acknowledged or respected by the religious community, even people with a solid faith in God can struggle tremendously, especially when facing life without a treasured attachment figure. Moreover, even individuals who feel that they can no longer participate in organized religion or maintain a relationship with God might return to both again at a later date, perhaps once the pain of the loss has lessened.

Finally, although all focus group participants endorsed CSG in their questionnaire narratives and

during the group session, not all of them endorsed high levels of CG ($n=3$; as assessed using the ICG-R), or high levels of CSG quantitatively ($n=3$; as assessed using the NRC or Discontent subscales). This highlights the advantage of a study that includes an open-ended questionnaire and a focus group, which enabled us to capture qualitatively what we could not quantitatively.

Study Implications: Measurement and Treatment

We believe that results from our study can inform both spiritual leaders and mental health professionals, with the former having the unique advantage of drawing upon established relationships with congregants experiencing the sting of loss, and the latter providing adjunctive support or being called upon in cases of intolerable or prolonged psycho-spiritual suffering. Moreover, our findings call for a scale specifically designed to capture the range of experiences of spiritually inclined bereaved individuals whose faith has been compromised by loss. Such a bereavement-specific measurement of spiritual struggle could be an aid to treatment planning or monitoring, as well as to further research. Fortunately, an empirically validated inventory to assess CSG recently has been developed and tested (Burke et al., 2014, this issue).

The current qualitative findings, however, could be used to improve clinical and research assessment of CSG, drawing on the questionnaire narratives and focus group responses to formulate a fuller and more grief-specific set of items to evaluate for psychometric adequacy (internal consistency, test-retest reliability, discriminant, convergent, predictive, and construct validity). A further benefit of this work would be the possible development of a multifactorial measure, perhaps one whose factor structure might mirror some of the thematic clusters derived from the present analysis. If so, more precise assessment of CSG and its various dimensions would be possible in future research and practice settings.

Finally, Stein and colleagues (2010) asserted that, "Diagnosis should facilitate the process of patient evaluation and treatment rather than hinder it" (p. 1764). Accordingly, our overarching goal in studying CSG is to alleviate distress, believing this to be best aided by empirically supported assessment and accomplished through a targeted psycho-spiritual intervention.

Limitations

The current study is one of few exploring the relation between complicated bereavement and spiritual crisis. Strengths of our design include participant diversity in terms of age, race, church affiliation, and mode of death.

In addition, reliance on the use of a focus group, member checking, and triangulation likewise strengthened our study. Nevertheless, some limitations of our findings should be underscored. First, the research design was limited due to its cross-sectional nature. Had we had an opportunity to conduct another focus group session at a later time period, we would have been in a better position to trace the progress, severity, duration and outcome of CSG, possibly detecting how it might ultimately contribute to spiritual resilience and maturation. Second, although diversity characterized the focus group on a number of levels, our understanding of CSG was restricted by the lack of male representation, inasmuch as men's grief may be characterized by more "cognitive" and action-oriented themes, rather than the emphasis on emotion and relationship, more typical of women (Doka & Martin, 2010), which could have found expression in different forms of spiritual struggle. Still, in our estimation, one focus group was ample for this initial study because it: (a) fleshed out the written narratives contributed by 84 participants, who provided greater grounding for the themes evident in the focus group members, and (b) generated sufficient data from the focus group responses (i.e., 34 double-spaced pages of narrative that included a wide range of themes) to elucidate key constructs. Nevertheless, results from this study lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive qualitative study with multiple focus groups that could bridge remaining gaps in our understanding on this topic. Finally, and critically, our reliance on a sample of Protestant Christians culturally situated in the mid-South of the United States obviously does not attempt to characterize the vast range of religious traditions or secular philosophies, within which spiritual struggle might be expressed in quite different terms. To choose but a few examples, spiritual complications in bereavement could take different forms in more highly ritualized monotheistic traditions such as Orthodox Judaism or Islam, when specific protocols for behavior during the dying, funeral, or bereavement process could be a target of concern, or in Asian or New Age philosophies, where less or no emphasis is placed on a personal relationship to a specific God or religious community. Thus, in both the current qualitative study and in the quantitative research program on which it builds, we have attempted to refine our understanding of a Christian variant of spiritual struggle resulting from loss, to permit closer study of its role in bereavement adaptation.

In summary, our aim was to empirically explore the relation between CG and CSG in a sample that included survivors experiencing both violent and natural death losses. In addition, we sought to gain a clearer understanding of the experience of study participants who suffered from CSG, both in relation to God and their spiritual

supporters, by analyzing their personal narratives. Our quest for understanding also included a focus group, enabling us to test whether our findings resonated with their personal experiences of spiritual struggle and to invite further clarification on this crucial topic. Undoubtedly, further research examining the correlation between CG and CSG is needed. However, we hope the results of our efforts will better organize and advance the field of psychology in relation to both bereavement and spirituality. Moreover, our findings revealed a good deal about the nature of spiritual crisis following loss and could prove useful for the further development of a grief-specific measure to assess spiritual struggle in the context of bereavement and targeted psycho-spiritual interventions for believers who are struggle spiritually in their grief.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

First, we are going to ask you a few questions in relation to your feelings or thoughts about God following your loss:

1. What feelings of confusion did you experience in relation to God's character (e.g., his love, his goodness, his power, Him as a healer, or a disciplinarian, or His overall intentions)?
2. People commonly report feeling angry or betrayed following loss. How was this true for you?
3. Some people express feelings of terror in relation to God. What has been your experience of this in relation to your loss?

Next, we are interested in how your relationship with God has been challenged since your loved one died. For instance:

4. In what ways did your experience cause you to question God's Word?
 - a. What about questioning your faith?
5. How has your experience challenged your reliance upon God?
6. As a result, are you more *self*-reliant? By that I mean, in what ways do you rely less on God and more on yourself?
7. Some people who question God's love, goodness, or caring have walked away from God. What more can you tell us about people who have walked away from God as a result of their loss?

Now, we want to ask about your feelings and thoughts about your relationships with others in your spiritual community. For example:

8. Can you describe times that you have felt abandoned by your spiritual community—perhaps because they thought that you grieved too long?
9. What kinds of negative emotions (e.g., anger or a feeling of numbness) have you felt toward your spiritual community?

10. Have these negative emotions been a result of feeling misunderstood or neglected? If so, what can you tell us about that?
11. Describe how your negative emotions caused you to withdraw from your spiritual community (i.e., how have you isolated yourself or felt the need to “care for yourself”?).
12. Were there times in which you felt invalidated by your community of believers? Perhaps times in which you felt that they were insincere? What more can you tell us about that?
13. Despite how others in your faith tradition might *think* you should feel, how have you searched but struggled to find benefit in your loss?

Finally, we want to know about the ways in which your relationship with your spiritual community has been challenged since your loss.

14. How have you questioned your spiritual beliefs in ways that have subsequently caused you to change or cease your participation in certain religious activities or rituals?
15. Some people find that grieving certain types of death or losing certain people are harder than others. For instance, some people feel that others cannot relate to the loss of a child or to death as a result of homicide. Please expound on your experience of this in relation to your community of believers.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP FINAL CODING SCHEME

Note: SC = Spiritual Community.

1. Weakened Faith in God
 - 1.1 Questioning God's Existence
 - 1.2 Questioning Ability to Rely on God
 - 1.2.a Walking away from/closing door on God
 - 1.2.a.1 May fluctuate/might not be forever
 - 1.2.b Resorting to self-reliance
 - 1.2.c Fluctuate between reliance on God and self-reliance
 - 1.3 Questioning God's Character
 - 1.3.a Questioning God's power
 - 1.3.b Questioning God's intentions/reasons
 - 1.3.c Questioning God's goodness/caring
 - 1.3.d Questioning God as physical, psychological, or spiritual healer
 - 1.3.e God as punisher
 - 1.4 Questioning God's Word
 - 1.5 Spiritual struggle/crisis
 - 1.5.a Means a person is weak
 - 1.5.b Means a person has a poor knowledge of God or his Word
 - 1.5.c Might fluctuate
 - 1.5.d Might not last forever

- 1.5.e Means a person has a lack of faith
- 1.5.f Can be coupled with a strong faith that not always realized by SC
- 2. Negative Perceptions and Feelings in Relation to God
 - 2.1 Negative Behaviors Perceived by the Griever to Stem from God
 - 2.1.a Betrayal
 - 2.1.b Abandonment
 - 2.1.c Robbed
 - 2.2 Negative Feelings Toward God
 - 2.2.a Anger
 - 2.2.b Sadness
 - 2.2.c Hurt
 - 2.2.d Confusion (mixed emotions)
 - 2.2.e Devastated/shocked
 - 2.2.f Numb
 - 2.2.g Disappointed
 - 2.2.h Frustrated
 - 2.3 Question what griever or loved one did to cause death or deserve this
 - 2.4 Struggle to make spiritual sense
 - 2.5 Helplessness
 - 2.6 Shattered constructs/assumptions
 - 2.7 Tried to hurt God in return by cursing at him
- 3. Spiritual Community's Fallible or Unhelpful Support
 - 3.1 Emotionally or physically abandoned or neglected by SC
 - 3.2 Discontinued or Evaded Fellowship with SC
 - 3.2.a Sought Isolation for self-care
 - 3.2.b Went to new church where could be anonymous
 - 3.2.c Avoided SC
 - 3.3 Felt Misunderstood by SC
 - 3.3.a SC couldn't relate to type of loss (e.g., homicide)
 - 3.3.b SC used invalidating clichés/questions
 - 3.4 Weakened Trust in SC
 - 3.4.a Questioned SC's beliefs
 - 3.4.b SC lacked answers
 - 3.4.c Questioned SC intentions
 - 3.4.d Felt SC lied about God's character
 - 3.5 Negative Perceptions and Feelings in Relation to SC
 - 3.5a Negative behaviors perceived by the griever to stem from the SC
 - 3.5.a.1 Judged/condemned by SC for being angry at/questioning God
 - 3.5.a.2 Said insensitive things to griever
 - 3.5.a.3 Placed unrealistic expectations on griever
 - 3.5.a.4 Remained silent about the death (didn't discuss, as if did not happen)
 - 3.5.a.5 More concerned about their comfort than griever's pain
 - 3.5.a.6 Viewed griever as victim only
 - 3.5.a.7 Wouldn't let griever express how he/she felt
 - 3.5.a.8 Want to convince griever to think differently
 - 3.5.b Negative feelings/perceptions about SC
 - 3.5.b.1 Anger towards SC
 - 3.5.b.2 Uncomfortable with SC
 - 3.5.b.3 Question SC's ability to handle grief
 - 3.5.b.4 Frustrated with SC
 - 3.5.b.5 Griever feared would not be received well if shared his/her feelings
- 3.6 No SC to Lean on/Weak Ties to SC
- 3.7 Selective who share with/Hide true feeling from SC because fear more hurt from them
- 3.8 Don't want pity from SC
- 3.9 Want/need SC to try to understand how griever feels
- 4. Changes in Faith-related Behaviors/Activities/Attitudes
 - 4.1 Stopped praying
 - 4.2 Came to believe that he/she needed to be a better person
 - 4.3 Became less faithful
 - 4.4 Discontinued church attendance
 - 4.5 Discontinued church volunteerism
 - 4.6 Withdrew from worship or changed worship style
 - 4.7 Discontinued Christmas celebrations
 - 4.8 Discontinued fellowship participation
- 5. Spiritual Concerns Related to Afterlife
 - 5.1 Wondered about loved one's destiny
 - 5.2 Wondered if will see loved one again
 - 5.3 Questioned existence of heaven and/or hell