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# ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Share his troubles: perceptions of men living with grief

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## Abstract

The National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement by the Australian Government seeks to reduce men's suicide rates. Yet men who experience grief face unique challenges, including stigmatisation when they are perceived as failing to adhere loyally to their socialised gendered role. One challenge pertaining to bereaved men concerns their social network and how insiders and outsiders come to understand the subjective nature of their grief, and how best to offer support. The present study adopted a social constructionist approach to explore how participants perceived a fictitious character experiencing grief using a hypothetical vignette. A convenience sample of nine males and seven females who resided in Australia participated in answering seven questions concerning the character's experience of grief by way of associated social networks. The following analytic themes were identified: either participants work with or against hegemonic masculinity to: (1) help me feel their grief, (2) help men think through their grief, and (3) help men express their grief. The study highlights the importance of developing tools to assist social networks of bereaved men to help them feel, think and express their emotions during times of grief. Scholars may expand upon the findings by adopting in-depth qualitative and Online Photo Voice methodologies to develop enhanced mental health practitioner tools to assist men who are experiencing grief as well as their social networks.

## Keywords

Grief; Men's mental health; Social constructionism; Hegemonic masculinity; Inner and outer social network

## 1. Introduction

According to the Australian Government's National Men's Health Strategy 2020–2030[1] death by suicide is more than three times as common in males versus females. The National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement[2] seeks to target men's mental ill-health which is also influenced by sociodemographic factors with higher rates of suicide occurring in male populations, including men from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, "men who are based in rural and or remote areas, men with higher levels of disadvantage, men with disabilities; members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex or queer (LGBTI +) community, men in the justice system, men who never married, fathers in the postnatal period and men who are retired or unemployed compared to men in the general population" (p.3).

Empirical studies indicate that social support can be incredibly helpful in mitigating the risk of male suicide [1, 2]. Similarly, empirical studies have demonstrated that social

support can reduce the negative impacts associated with the experience of grief [3, 4]. Yet, when members of a social network perceive grieving men to be displaying behaviour that is inconsistent with their prescribed masculine roles within society, these social situations can leave people perplexed and uncertain as to how to help [5]. More problematically, interpersonal relationships or associations can be left in a state of disrepair because there is a lack of understanding on both sides [6].

According to Gilbert [7], the experience of grief typically refers to an individual's subjective response to a loss, with loss in the context of grief reflecting both death and non-death related life events. Understandably, the subjective nature of grief reflects both varied and complex experiences, evident by the wide-ranging effects it can have on cognition and affect [8]. Moreover, experiencing grief typically not only results in a combination of cognitive and affective responses, but also physical, behavioural, social and spiritual implications which come together, either temporarily or chronically to impact how the bereaved view the world around them and their place within it [9].

One serious consequence for bereaved men is the degree in which others understand the subjective nature of their grief, including family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues and

associates [5]. Because the bereaved commonly withdraw from their social networks when experiencing grief [10] it can be difficult for members of the social network to understand what is going on for them. This lack of knowledge was documented by an early theorist Lindemann [11] who argued that interpersonal relationships have the capacity to change quite substantially after experiences of loss. Lindemann [11] explained that experiencing grief can not only lead to social withdrawal, but may also include a range of ill social behaviours on the part of the bereaved, such as expressing high degrees of irritability and aggression. Arguably, for some family members, friends, work colleagues and associates, these behaviours could be perceived and interpreted as maladaptive, reflecting a condition known as Complicated Grief (CG) [12–14]. CG typically impacts bereaved individuals for prolonged periods resulting in distress and compromised day to day functionality. CG symptoms reflect intense pangs of grief that are intertwined with fixations upon those who died [12] with some instances leading bereaved individuals to experience comorbid depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Individuals with CG therefore present with higher suicidal risk [13].

CG often transpires because grief-stricken individuals are challenged by their taken for granted assumptions about life which no longer apply after experiencing loss [13]. As such, bereaved individuals often feel they have lost a high degree of control over their lives. The bereaved feel their life has been turned upside down [12]. In this way, everything that was once considered safe and certain becomes vulnerable and ambiguous leading to a range of negative emotions.

For instance, immediately after the experience of loss, grieving individuals typically experience strong emotions such as shock, disbelief and numbness [15]. According to Dyregrov and Dyregrov [6], being in a state of shock enables the bereaved to absorb their loss at a time that is suitable for them. Longer term problems associated with reactions to grief include periods of social isolation [16], intermittent feelings of loss [13], intermittent yearning and pain [12], self-reproachment and guilt [17, 18], sleep disturbances [19], intermittent anxiety [15], a sense of vulnerability [20], impaired interpersonal communications [21], concentration and memory problems [22] as well as anger and irritability [23]. Importantly, CG combined with differing risk factors [24] such as living with a history of mental illness, traumatic past events or previous experience of loss also indirectly impacts the social network of the bereaved [25].

## 2. The social network of the bereaved

According to Hansen and Guldin *et al.* [26] most bereaved individuals have an inner circle of close family members and friends, as well as an outer circle that encompasses peripheral friends and acquaintances. The inner circle typically includes family and friends who know the grieving individual best and who are least likely to desert them during their recovery [6]. The authors explained the inner social network tends to exhibit high degrees of support in various forms and are often those individuals the bereaved has known for a long period of time. By contrast, the outer social network is generally larger and comprises of a number of individuals, including work colleagues, neighbours and distant family members, as well as those who are loosely associated with the bereaved [6].

### 2.1 Communication challenges

Specifically, families may develop greater difficulties in communicating with one another about their feelings and thoughts during the experience of loss [26]. For families that were already fraught with ineffective communication, a loss may lead to further communication difficulties. Furthermore, some men are also perceived to insufficiently communicate their subjective experiences of grief [5] as a way to protect others from exacerbating their feelings of pain. Indeed, some men experience alexithymia which is an inability to identify or express emotions, including feelings of grief [27].

### 2.2 Concentration and memory

Concentration and memory difficulties also become particularly obvious when returning to work related duties [28]. McGuinness stated that bereaved individuals may experience intrusive memories consequently interrupting focus whilst trying to complete cognitively dense tasks. In addition, they may experience decreased mental agility resulting from emotions such as sadness [28, 29]. Problematically, such memory and concentration issues can be chronic. [28]. Consequently, those around them, including work colleagues, family members and friends may become increasingly irritated and less tolerant for lapses in the quality of work or the amount of effort exercised at home.

### 2.3 Increased sensitivity

In addition, the grieving individual may experience increased sensitivity concerning their home or place of work due to changed perceptions toward them by their social environment [30]. One reason for changes in perception were argued by Vogel and Wade *et al.* [31] and other scholars [32] who stated the experience of loss reflects different grief related strategies which are connected to traditional socialised gender roles. Specifically, in societies which demonstrate high degrees of Hegemonic Masculinity (HM), men are encouraged to suppress the expression of their grief to ensure they conform to masculinised norms in society [5].

### 2.4 Gender differences

Relatedly, there is strong empirical support to reflect that grieving men compared to women differ in their interpersonal experiences of grief [5]. Women tend to seek out others to communicate about their loss, whereas men will try focus their thoughts on matters such as work [10]. Strobe and Schut *et al.* [10] argued that bereaved men can feel isolated because social networks withdraw for various reasons. Moreover, some men who experience grief feel guilty and shameful about their loss causing them to socially withdraw [18]. This view was supported by scholars [29] who argued that social withdrawal can promulgate a vicious cycle, resulting in the social network gradually pulling away from the bereaved. Social isolation, therefore, can lead to communication break-downs between

grieving men and their various social networks.

## 3. Hegemonic masculinity and grief

Hegemonic Masculinity is the culturally codified indoctrination of boys, conveyed by cultural scripts such as "boys are tough" [33]. HM represents the idealistic future that men perceive they are expected to subjectively realise if they consistently enact language and behaviour that is aligned with the dominant role played by men within society. As such, masculinised codified rules are both espoused and enacted for boys throughout their developmental years [34]. These rules are claimed to eventually lead young boys to experience manhood. This toughening up process seems to suppress associated thoughts or emotions that may represent gendered weakness. Whilst HM has been intensely debated amongst scholars [35], Inclusive Masculinity Theory (MIT) conversely claimed that men's gender promulgates emotional expressiveness and softening of masculinised gender codes [36].

It is clear that studies have explored grief in numerous ways, however limited empirical research has sought to understand how the inner and outer social network might effectively respond and support grieving men when they are pressured to conform to their socialised gendered role. The reality is that members of the social network perhaps do not know how to appropriately respond or support men during such sensitive periods. Learning about why this might be the case is therefore both urgent, and necessary.

## 4. Theoretical paradigm

This study sought to answer "how do insiders and outsiders perceive men who are experiencing grief?". To answer this question, this study purports that social constructionism [37] broadens both theoretical and empirical terrain when appropriately adopted to explore psychosocial phenomena such as perceptions of men experiencing grief. For this reason, social constructionism was adopted as this study's theoretical paradigm. It has within its power to inform policy that targets, encourages and directs members of the inner and outer social network to support men experiencing grief, thereby reducing the highly corrosive impact to men's mental-ill-health during times of grief.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Theoretical position

According to Berger and Luckman [38], from an epistemologically perspective, social constructionism generates knew knowledge through the construction of culture, context, language and social discourse. For this reason, this study did not apply conceptions a priori to inform the coding of the data. Specifically, the study examined the language that informed the construction of participants' system of meaning, thereby offering interpretations concerning responses as expressed by the study's participants.

### 5.2 Tool design

The design of the hypothetical vignette was informed by the review of the literature, combined with Murphy and Hughes' *et al*'s. [39] vignette design approach. Specifically, the hypothetical vignette was designed to reflect a relatively typical scenario of the circumstances grieving men may experience after loss in the real world. Two iterations followed the initial design with academics in the field of psychology supporting the final version. It was critical the vignette reflected a character that participants could identify with, particularly concerning age, gender and race [40]. Concurrently, the design of the vignette aimed to limit the degree in which participants would focus on individual or personal grief felt experiences. The vignette was designed in a way that enabled participants to focus directly on the hypothetical character's experience of grief when answering the survey questions.

### 5.3 Research question

This study sought to answer the question: how do insiders and outsiders perceive men who are experiencing grief? To answer the research question, a number of survey questions were asked of participants, including, "*How do you perceive Dave to be feeling in this situation? What do you think Dave's family might think and feel about him? How do you imagine Dave's work colleagues to perceive him? Do you think people might respond to the character differently if they were a woman?*" [5]. While there are noteworthy limitations pertaining to the adoption of hypothetical vignettes [41], their use is becoming more frequent as a qualitative research tool for exploring sensitive and complex topics [42]. For this reason, this method was chosen over face-to-face interviews as the study aimed to broadly discover how members of the inner and outer social network would respond to a grieving man within Australian society.

### 5.4 Data collection

Participants were informed about the opportunity to take part in the research via email and through social media. Platforms including LinkedIn[3] were utilised by posting recruitment advertisements. Participants did not receive any incentives to complete the study. Adults who participated in the study selected a Qualtrics link which was embedded into an email as well as social media postings. Upon selecting and opening the link, participants read the Explanatory Statement and were explicitly told their implied consent was acknowledged when they completed their responses to the questions via Qualtrics.

The Explanatory Statement summarised the purpose of the research comprising of the hypothetical vignette, survey questions and the dissemination of results. In addition, the Explanatory Statement provided information relating to Monash University's Ethics Committee in the event that participants required supplementary information concerning the study or had further questions.

Participants were requested to allocate approximately 15–30 minutes of their time to respond to the survey questions.

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[3]LinkedIn is an online social media platform for professionals. See www.linkedin.com

This length of time was designed to encourage participant engagement and to ensure the return of high-quality data. During this period, participants were asked to answer several demographic questions, including their age, gender, ethnicity, occupation and highest level of education. Participants read the hypothetical vignette thereafter and answered the open-ended questions. Participants were not required to answer all the vignette-related questions to exit the study if they did not wish to continue. The questions did not contain emotive language. The hypothetical vignette stated:

Dave is a 55-year-old Caucasian male and working professional. Until recently, Dave lived a happy life with no major upsets. He has three children, however his wife of 30 years recently passed away months ago. Since the death of his wife, Dave speaks with a flat tone. He can also be abrupt with people and is socially withdrawn, including from his children. Recently, Dave was observed by his neighbours to be cursing at the mailman. At work, he is forgetful and struggles to meet deadlines [5] (p.3).

The data collection period lasted approximately 4 weeks. Participants could not withdraw their answers from the study after they submitted their responses as participation was anonymous. All captured responses contributed to the findings. Electronic data was kept on the author's University online data repository "LabArchives" (https://www.labarchives.com/) and in a password-protected file on the researcher's laptop.

## 5.5 Analytic technique

Thematic Analysis (TA) was selected for this research. This analytic technique is both theoretically flexible and accessible for interpreting qualitative data [43–45]. TA is also highly appropriate for the analysis of participant responses to hypothetical vignettes [46, 47]. By adopting TA, the researcher presented themes reflecting participant meanings. These meanings were analysed from the perceptions participants made of the hypothetical character's inner and outer social network.

Distance was placed between both participants and the researcher, enabling the researcher to thoughtfully analyse participants' perceptions [48] pertaining to the fictitious character. As such, the researcher moved between perceptual positions and layers of abstraction whilst interpreting the data. This process was aided by bracketing the researcher's biases [48, 49] as recorded in her study journal. Consequently, the researcher was able to explore how Australian society reinforced these systems of meaning pertaining to perceptions of the inner and outer social network and the fictional character's experience of grief.

## 5.6 Data analysis procedure

Participant responses were iteratively examined in six phases to determine the meaning participants attributed to the topic of investigation in alignment with Braun and Clarke [43] and Saldana's [45] approach. In the first phase, the researcher read and re-read participant responses to the questions in an active way, which immersed the researcher in the data. Concurrently, the researcher also recorded thoughts concerning patterns of meaning of the data. In the second phase, the researcher gener-

ated preliminary codes across the breadth of the data and were documented in Microsoft word (Microsoft, 2021, Washington, USA). Each code answered the research question. In the third phase, the analytic procedure necessitated the researcher to re-read all of the coded data to evolve the preliminary categories and themes. In the fourth phase, the researcher refined all themes by ensuring data extracts were correctly positioned to each theme. During this phase, a few themes were discarded which left the researcher with data that explicitly answered the research question. In the fifth stage, a final review of the categories and themes transpired along with the positioning of extracts supporting the claims of each theme. In the sixth stage, final checks of the findings were presented to other scholars in the field. This approach ensured data meritocracy, truthfulness and validity, supported by the researcher's reflexive thematic account [50] of the study's findings.

## 6. Results

The study recruited 16 participants (M = 9; F = 7) (see Table 1) residing in Australia through convenience sampling via online platforms. In this regard, the study reflects consistency with Gray and Royall's *et al.* [47] recommendation of 15 to 20 participants for vignette base studies. There were no other exclusion criteria other than being an English-speaking adult living in Australia. No participants withdrew from the study. Eleven participants achieved at least a bachelor's level of education. Fifteen participants expressed previous experiences of grief. In addition, participants were notified that the study formed part of the researcher's Graduate Diploma Psychology Advanced (GDPA) program.

Participant responses to the short survey questionnaire represented a spectrum of simple statements to elaborate, more thoughtful constructions. This is made evident in participant excerpts within each of the study's themes. The study's themes reflect hegemonic masculinity as per participants' perceptions concerning the inner and outer social network. Specifically, the inner and outer social network would work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men *feel* their grief, work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men *think* through their grief, and work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men *express* their grief.

## 6.1 Theme one: work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men feel their grief

Firstly, participants conveyed their perceptions of Dave's subjective feelings after the loss of his wife by stating, "Dave would be feeling socially lost", "heart-broken", "depressed", "upset and worried", with feelings of "sadness, regret and agitation" as well as feeling "dark, with intense feelings of loneliness" and "in severe shock". One participant stated that Dave would be "angry, but probably doesn't realise it". Another participant stated:

Dave would be feeling lost and emotionally unstable… The physical and mental patterns of his life have been altered… Waking up to an empty bed, not having his wife to talk to, buy things for. His sexual life would cease… It would be similar

**TABLE 1. Participant's profile.**

| Participant | Age (yr) | Gender | Ethnicity | State | Occupation | Education | Exp. of grief |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | 43 | Female | Australian | New South Wales (NSW) | Sales | Post Grad | Yes |
| Participant 2 | 39 | Female | Australian | NSW | Manager | Doctorate | Yes |
| Participant 3 | 41 | Male | North African | NSW | Manager | Higher School Certificate (HCS) | Yes |
| Participant 4 | 36 | Male | Indian | NSW | Manager | Post Grad | Yes |
| Participant 5 | 43 | Male | Australian | NSW | Director | Bachelors | Yes |
| Participant 6 | 45 | Male | Australian | NSW | Manager | Doctorate | Yes |
| Participant 7 | 45 | Female | Australian | NSW | Manager | Bachelors | Yes |
| Participant 8 | 47 | Male | Egyptian | NSW | Actor | High school | Yes |
| Participant 9 | 35 | Female | Australian | NSW | Teacher | Bachelor | Yes |
| Participant 10 | 46 | Female | Australian | NSW | Student | HSC | Yes |
| Participant 11 | 41 | Female | Australian | NSW | Operations | Technical and Further Education (TAFE) | Yes |
| Participant 12 | 70 | Male | Australian | Queensland (QLD) | Director | HSC | Yes |
| Participant 13 | 38 | Male | Australian | QLD | Trader | Bachelor | Yes |
| Participant 14 | 38 | Female | Nigeria | NSW | Student | Doctorate | Yes |
| Participant 15 | 32 | Male | Australian | Victoria (VIC) | Manager | Bachelor | No |
| Participant 16 | 38 | Male | Greek | NSW | Manager | Bachelor | Yes |

to losing a limb, but worse.

…If the displaced emotions are left unresolved, potentially they will escalate in all areas of his life, not just the ones described, and that will lead to further negative impacts on all aspects of Dave's life, be it social, family, work, *etc.*

Some participant perceptions of Dave's inner and outer social network indicated they could work against hegemonic masculinity by not deliberately engaging in dialogue about his grief while spending time with him. Rather participants suggested they should support Dave to feel his emotions in his own time and in ways that were suitable to him by having "sympathy for him", by acknowledging "his challenges", "showing compassion", "being understanding" and by "offering support" only when requested. An important perceptual component of this work reflected an unspoken dimension of support. For instance, the inner and outer social network should be "patient" and "sympathetic" and when called upon "encouraging". His family should "stay close" and "lift him up". Similarly, some participants suggested the inner and outer social network could help Dave by working against hegemonic masculine norms by showing "strength" and by "being understanding of any negative behaviour that comes from him" because this would "help him come out of whatever he is going through".

However, many participants did not feel comfortable in reaching out to a character like Dave in real life, given that before the death of his wife he was perceived as powerful, privileged and stoic. In this way, some participants' perceptions appeared to be working in alignment with hegemonic masculinity to ensure Dave's language and behaviour would

not morph from what is permitted as socially acceptable as this representation reflects utopian forms of manliness. For instance, some participants interpreted Dave's grief related behaviours in a way that jeopardised his manhood, thereby restricting their support with the view that his behaviour would reverse at some future time preserving the character's socially constructed image. For instance, one participant commented, "the degree of sympathy expressed is uncertain because Dave is a man… people may feel that expressing too much sympathy is not the right thing to do". Another participant expressed, "they would feel sorry for him… but they might be frightened to approach him". Similarly, another participant stated, "Dave's family would feel sad for him, but also frustrated", this frustration plausibly causing indirect pressure upon Dave to regain his manliness. Similarly, another participant commented, "his family would feel sad about his loss but are starting to get over it", and they would be "wishing he would deal with it better". This perspective suggests that Dave should suppress his grief felt emotions in order to conform to hegemonic masculine norms by staying faithful to his traditional role in society as a White privileged man. These comments also convey the belief that gender plays a significant factor when deciding on an appropriate amount of support during times of grief by members of the inner and outer social network.

The foregoing excerpts indicate that participants would actively work against hegemonic masculine norms or would align themselves with these norms as a method to support Dave during his experience of grief. Some participants offered detailed responses in contrast to those who reflected greater

ambivalence or who worked in alignment with hegemonic masculinity about how Dave's inner and outer social network could assist him to feel his emotions of grief. These findings suggest that a greater degree of empathy was felt for Dave's plight by these participants, implying that individuals who possessed greater degrees of empathy encompassed broader and deeper capacity to think about complex and sensitive matters, such as men's experience of grief. Another equally interesting theme in which participants aligned with or against hegemonic masculine norms pertains to Dave *thinking* about his grief.

## 6.2 Theme two: work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men think through their grief

Participants indicated that Dave's cognition would reflect signs of disorganisation, frustration and confusion, that he would be living "a daily struggle" where he would be "spiraling… into darkness", "stressed that he's not in control" and that Dave would have "no particular direction". One participant conveyed, Dave would be "in a state of uncertainty and not really knowing what to do regarding his next steps in life". From a psychopathological perspective, some participants expressed that Dave would be experiencing "anxiety" and be "ruminating" about the death of his wife and that he would "struggle to think about the future" because "he may be in denial about all the things that are going on around him". Specifically, one participant commented, "Dave would be questioning his life's purpose, finding it difficult to reimagine his identity… or renegotiate who he is. How he relates to aspects of his life, relationships, purpose and identity would provide constant reminders of his loss".

Specifically, some participants indicated the inner and outer social network should work against hegemonic masculinity by allowing "him space to sort out and think about his problems in his own time" so that Dave could "come to terms with the loss of his wife". One participant elaborated on Dave's ability to think through his grief by actively working against hegemonic masculine norms by saying:

Aspects that could influence his life are social supports, social and personal construction of his roles and whether they are shaped by gender values, the expectations and demands of his workplace and their perception of a grieving man, and how his children are experiencing grief.

Another participant stated:

If Dave is able to get some form of therapy, he will likely be able to process the death of his wife more easily, he could also rebuild his life and remain close with his family in the process. If Dave decided not to get help, I see his situation deteriorating. His grief will last longer and all the symptoms that go along with that.

These excepts suggest that if Dave was to actively work against hegemonic masculinity, he would recover from his grief. However, if he allowed hegemonic norms to control his behaviour, his situation would get worse. Evidently, some participant perceptions concerning how the inner and outer social network would support Dave to actively work against hegemonic masculine norms reflected encouraging Dave to get support through psychotherapy or other forms of professional support.

By contrast, some participants suggested that Dave should adhere to hegemonic masculinity by avoiding thoughts about his grief. Specifically, one participant stated, "Dave should try to continue his normal daily engagements to get his mind off it". More interestingly, other participants believed Dave's degree of internalised hegemonic masculinity would determine how well he would be able to think through his grief. Participants reflected this by saying, "it depends on his mental makeup. How resilient he is. How much knowledge and wisdom he carries in dealing with loss" and "depending on his personality, it may take longer to recover".

Moreover, some participants believed the inner and outer social network would reflect ambivalence concerning how to support Dave think through his grief. The reasons behind this ambivalence were varied, yet responses were tied to Dave's perceived diminished masculine identity. One participant stated, "he may be unrecognisable to his family and friends in terms of his shifting roles and identity" reflecting the notion that Dave "is no longer a husband and that he may not know how to handle it". Another interesting perspective reflected:

His personality may have changed so gradually that his family and friends didn't notice anything and not know what to do. If that happened, he would have gradually become less and less likeable. He may be dealing with rejection from those he cares about most because of this.

Similarly, another participant stated, "Over the next few months, they will likely become less accommodating if he remains in his current state". These extracts convey participants believed Dave's inner and outer social network should reinforce hegemonic masculine norms in order for Dave to retain his "personality" and "identity" to remain "likeable".

Perceptions of Dave's work colleagues presented greater enforcement of hegemonic masculinity. One participant was particularly scathing by stating, "his colleagues already have a benchmark on how he was working pre and during his wife's death. They will begin to see him as an outsider... As for his competitors, they will revel on his downfall". Another participant commented that Dave's colleagues "would probably think the shift in his behaviour is off and try to avoid him". Similarly, another participant echoed this sentiment by saying, "his colleagues and superiors may not bother asking questions and just get rid of him". Yet another participant said that Dave would be perceived as "slack and not pulling his weight" because "they would label him as they see his behaviour… he will be judged on those observations, with future promotions being in jeopardy" and they will label him "incompetent". In fact, some participants stated that Dave would be perceived "increasingly as a burden and inconvenience" in which their "tolerance level for any negative behaviour would be less".

The excerpts above indicate that participants' perceptions reflect a continuum whereby the inner and outer social network would either work in alignment with or against hegemonic masculine norms. The former promotes the view that the inner and outer social network suppresses Dave to think about his grief, whereas the latter works to encourage Dave to think through his grief. To actively work against hegemonic mas-

culinity, some participants expressed that Dave would benefit from the inner and outer social network offering various types of social support and encourage Dave to receive therapy of various kinds. The most obvious contrast of perspectives was identified when participants were asked about Dave's work colleagues, whereby they would actively work in alignment with hegemonic masculinity, ensuring Dave preserve his manhood within workplace settings by suppressing his grief related thoughts, language and behaviour. In some circumstances, perceptions of Dave's work colleagues were scathing, indicating that Dave's behaviour would not be tolerated for long in his workplace. Such behaviour was perceived to push Dave toward being an outcast. In addition, some participants reflected a degree of ambivalence regarding how the inner and outer social network should act toward Dave. The study's final theme expands the insights pertaining to Dave's inner and outer social network.

## 6.3 Theme three: work with or against hegemonic masculinity to support men express their grief

It was evident by the breadth of participant responses that a degree of empathy was felt by some as they answered the questions after reading the hypothetical vignette. For instance, one participant commented, "I know it is only a story, but I feel sorry for the poor fella. No one wants to go through this. I hope someone writes a happy ending to this scenario". Another participant commented, "the world sees this situation as happening all the time and we become more accepting of it unfortunately". Yet, despite seemingly high degrees of empathy conveyed by some participants concerning the fictional character's experience of grief and his inner and outer social network, it was also made evident that this empathy actively worked against hegemonic masculine norms in supporting Dave to express his grief. For instance, several participants expressed that it was appropriate to show unconditional support if Dave expressed his grief openly. Similarly, one participant stated, "he is not coping… offer help" by "helping him talk". Another participant said, "sympathise without being critical" and that Dave would be best to "share his troubles with a female".

Conversely, some participants' perceptions appeared to be in alignment with hegemonic masculine norms. For instance, two participants commented, "I think people are more comfortable accepting aggressive behaviour from men and it can be encouraged as well as it fits masculine traits". The inner and outer network should accept this because men "struggle to express their feelings". Interestingly, another participant commented, if Dave continues his behaviour he would probably get a promotion. There will be an opportunity for him to continue that behaviour and he might find opportunities from that. If there is a role requiring authority… he might be the first pick because he will be perceived as "Dave, he is a real go getter".

Concerning women within the inner and outer social network, one participant commented "women will grow tired of Dave's demeanour and passively distance themselves from him sooner than men". Similarly, another perspective reflected: to grieve in a socially acceptable manner, a man must… ideally maintain emotional control at all times… his grieving must end and he must carry his weight in society. He must maintain the appearance of having dealt with the grief regardless of whether he has been able to or not.

The foregoing extracts suggest that participants constructed their perceptions of the inner and outer social network based upon Dave's alignment with or against hegemonic masculine norms. The latter position indicated that Dave should be focused upon openly expressing his grief with those in his inner and outer social network. In most cases, however, participants' perceptions of the inner and outer social network appeared to be in alignment with hegemonic masculinity given Dave's pre-existing role as a powerful and privileged White man in Australian society. In these cases, participants believed the inner and outer social network would outrightly reject Dave as a person of importance by metaphorically stripping him of his privilege and power should his language and behaviour not regain hegemonic masculine status. Lastly, some participants expressed clear ambivalence concerning how to support Dave through the expression of his grief. These participants either did not want to traverse hegemonic masculine boundaries in supporting Dave or simply did not know how the inner or outer social network should traverse such boundaries.

## 7. Discussion

In ascertaining and interpreting participant answers to the hypothetical vignette's associated questions, three salient themes reflected views of the inner and outer social network, notably, work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men feel their grief, work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men think through their grief and work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men express their grief.

The first two themes reflected an intrapersonal task for grieving men in relation to how the inner and outer social network would support them to feel and think about their grief. Conversely, the third theme was an interpersonal task where perceptions of the inner and outer social network would support grieving men to express their grief. Some participants also appeared to actively work against hegemonic masculine norms by suggesting grieving men would be best to suppress their grief felt emotions as well as suppress thinking through and expressing grief. By contrast, other participants perceived the inner and outer social network should actively work against hegemonic masculine norms by supporting grieving men to seek therapy and engage with grief in ways that are most suitable to them.

The study's findings are well-timed since many government grants and broader initiatives are targeted toward reducing male suicide rates, including the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement which claims to implement a whole-of-government approach to build a better mental health and suicide prevention system for all Australians. Consequently, the study's findings place importance on reducing the pervading role that hegemonic masculinity plays within Australian society, and therefore should be part of future national mental health and suicide agreements. Given the findings, hegemonic masculinity continues to inhibit the degree and quality of interpersonal interactions that both members

of the inner and outer social network have with men who are experiencing vulnerable emotions, such as grief. Since it was clear that some participants could not construe with any level of certainty how family members, friends or colleagues should respond toward grieving men, the findings of this study also purports that health promotion initiatives should focus upon instructing how members of the inner and outer social network could best support men who are struggling with grief and loss, as well as other vulnerable emotions that men seek to suppress whilst being faithful to their socio-cultural gender role.

## 8. Actively working with or against hegemonic masculinity

This study is unique in that it provides empirical insights that are novel, timely and necessary as Australian based researchers, government led initiatives and many not-for-profit agencies grapple with ways to better assist men in managing their mental health. As such, this research aimed to explore people's perceptions of the inner and outer social network concerning men's experience of grief. One insight resulting from this study indicated that perceptions of the inner and outer social network reflected an intentional effort to work against hegemonic masculinity in supporting men to feel, think through and express their grief felt emotions. The data exemplified that when encountering a man like Dave who is expressing grief-like behaviour, family, friends and work colleagues' ability to understand that behaviour is crucial in deciding how they will respond. Participants' perceptions suggested that if Dave's family members, friends and work colleagues knew the reasons driving those behaviours, sympathy, empathy, care and social support could prevail. By contrast, if family members, friends and work colleagues were unaware of the reasons driving those behaviours, moderately serious interpersonal consequences would transpire, suggesting that men must feel safe to share their troubles by expressing their subjective experiences with trusted members of their inner and outer social network.

The vignette clearly highlighted that Dave was socially withdrawn, experiencing and expressing anger and irritability along with showing signs of poor attention, concentration and memory. Specifically, Dave was exhibiting signs of shock, yet only one participant responded in a way that acknowledged this subjective position. In short, whilst some participants took clear positions concerning working with or against hegemonic masculinity to support Dave in managing his grief, despite the information provided in the vignette, many participants also felt uncertain about how Dave's family, friends and work colleagues would respond in showing support. From this perspective, this research is consistent with Dyregrov and Dyregrov's [6] views who stipulated that some members of both the inner and outer social network may struggle to handle the grieving person's situation, not knowing how to engage with them after their experience of loss.

Conceivably in real world settings, when individuals perceive grieving men to be displaying socially uncomfortable behaviours particularly in public settings that appear conflicting to socialised male gender role norms, little support will likely be offered by them [5]. This study supports this view as

men's experience of grief can drastically change interpersonal dynamics, specifically where close relationships may be called into question both from the perspective of those grieving as well as by members of the inner and outer social network. This outcome for men who are experiencing grief is incredibly challenging given that prior research has stipulated that after the initial weeks have passed, the bereaved deeply need their friends, neighbours and or colleagues to attempt to bring them back to a sense of normality [6]. Rather than withdrawing from the bereaved, members of the inner and outer social network should seek to encourage them to return to a more normal existence. Whilst grieving men may not feel like engaging in social activities, family members, friends and colleagues should try to motivate them to take part in some form of social life. For the bereaved, social encounters may enable an outlet for intimate conversations with trusted others which is considered an extremely important type of social support when experiencing grief [22].

Furthermore, concerning Dave's colleagues, several participants' reflected a lack of support and at times, interpersonal destructiveness. Fortunately, many workplaces now adopt frameworks [22], policies and emergency plans, including showing compassion with regard to grief and crisis-stricken staff members [23]. Nonetheless, it appears that many grieving individuals still experience a lack of support, consideration and attention to their needs in workplace contexts. This is an important consideration since according to McGuinness [29] bereaved individual's welcome colleagues who provide support by encouraging them to attempt to return to work. In this regard, grief-stricken individuals prefer to return to flexible work arrangements which take into account their ability to complete day-to-day tasks as effectively as they can. However, as Gilbert and Mullen *et al.* [22] argued and as this study's findings support, a helpful social network may not always materialise particularly in workplace settings. Conceivably, being considered an outcast would result in further mental ill-health outcomes for men experiencing grief despite flexible work arrangements being offered and taken up by them.

This study also supports the views of Wong and Rochel [32] who suggested that men are less able to express their grief in ways suitable to them. One reason is due to the stigmatisation that men receive when they do not demonstrate behaviour that is in alignment with their socialised gendered role [5]. Arguably, during the experience of grief, it is more likely that outsiders will perceive men's behaviour as socially maladaptive compared to women. This type of behaviour is likely to last longer, an outcome which requires greater tolerance by the inner and outer social network. Hence, providing support can be tricky: not only must the inner and outer social network show support without too many words and often without knowing why certain behaviours are expressed at the outset, they also must offer compassion and encouragement that reflects deep sincerity toward the bereaved [6]. As the authors argued, the bereaved understand that their social networks feel unsure about how to interact with them, yet concurrently believe that it would be advantageous if networks expressed this openly. It is important to note that not only do the bereaved undergo significant psychosocial transitions after the experience of loss, so too is the case for the inner and outer social network. They

also endure a degree of psychosocial transition in that they must bring strong conscious awareness to how they engage in everyday interactions with the bereaved.

In summary, while studies concur that grieving men need support in a variety of forms, it is clear the inner and outer social network play a pivotal role as their actions will impact either directly or indirectly upon the grieving man's trajectory of recovery. Negotiating the nuances concerning how best to support grieving men by way of the inner and outer social network remains a delicate and complicated process, particularly when there is a high probability that non-adherence to the socialised gender role will be perceived by others and the community writ large as incompatible to social-cultural norms, leading to stigma and further mental ill health outcomes for grieving men in Australian society. To alleviate such strains, members of the inner and outer social network can invite or deepen their connections with grieving men by "sharing his troubles".

## 9. Significance and strengths

This study presents numerous significant findings, including insights that could assist public health initiatives in supporting men's mental health by focusing specifically on the inner and outer social network of grieving men. Initiatives targeted toward the inner and outer social network of grieving men would also help them to manage their own psychosocial transition. In other words, focusing upon the role they are to play toward the bereaved. In this view, scholars and mental health related professionals have a duty to provide the inner and outer social network with tools that work to reduce additional trauma faced by grieving individuals. Hence, when men are perceived as displaying social behaviour that is inconsistent with their socialised gender role, scholars, policy makers and mental health practitioners must offer members of the inner and outer social network with clear guidance as to how to optimally respond in order to avoid the bereaved being outcasted by their social network, a result which plausibly leads to further mental ill-health issues for grieving men.

One strength of this study is presented through its chosen methodology. Whilst the social constructionist approach [37] has received considerably less empirical attention verses quantitative methodologies, the study's findings confirm the method provides worthwhile interpretative insights that strengthens extant literature on the psychology of men's grief in combination with perceptions of the inner and outer social network. As a result of the study's chosen method, the findings brought to the surface the importance of factoring hegemonic masculinity into policy to promote men's mental health. Another significant strength of this study reflects the successful adoption of a vignette in delivering insights that are both useful and worthwhile for sensitive topics such men's vulnerable emotions. However, the scholarship could be both broadened and deepened by future research designs that include in-depth interviews with inner and outer social networks of the bereaved as presented in the limitations section of this article.

## 10. Implications

Based on Freudian psychotherapeutic principles [51], there are several steps that members of the inner and outer social network can take in supporting men to engage with their feelings, providing the bereaved provide access to enable the initiation of support. Firstly, being present for the person and creating an environment which is favourable for emotional processing is an optimal way to either initiate connection or deepen an already meaningful relationship. It is important to see the grieving individual as unique in terms of their needs, which may take some time and of which may be best enabled by supporting the bereaved to speak freely about that which occupies his thoughts and feelings.

From this perspective, one of the most valuable actions that members of the inner or outer social network can do is to develop the capacity to be open with the bereaved by interacting without prejudice or without preconceived notions about the bereaved man's subjective experience of grief. There are no true or false answers. The inner and outer social network's role is to attempt to discover subjective meaning by way of observed language and behaviour without making judgements. This requires members of the inner and outer social network to rely on their perceptive abilities and also upon accurate interpretation of thoughts and feelings garnered during interpersonal interactions with the bereaved as a basis to meaningfully understand what he is feeling and thinking, in situ. Whilst it is important for members of the inner and outer social network to be very flexible at the outset, as the connection or relationship grows stronger, members of the inner and outer social network can begin to speak about their own experiences without imposing their conceptualisations or beliefs about grief and loss onto the bereaved.

Furthermore, interactions between the inner or outer social network and the bereaved should reflect complete confidentiality. The bereaved should also be the person to make the first step to initiate dialogue, however members of the inner and outer social network should remain ready to assist at any time should the opportunity to provide support arise. As a support person, providing consistency is also critical to help deepen connection and establish confidence between both parties. Consistency also enables members of the inner and outer social network to develop a common language between themselves and the bereaved, whereby following their words can be helpful in understanding the state of their inner world. During this process, the bereaved may come to learn that he is not alone with what he is experiencing.

In summary, an important role for members of the inner and outer social network is to help catalyse a process of self-healing and self-discovery for the bereaved after the experience of loss. As the bereaved begins to process and understand his grief, he will learn to face the fear of the unknown and that remaining open to forms of change forms part of the healing journey. In this way, members of the inner and outer social network can support in grief recovery by transforming a negative situation into something positive by way of meaningful connection.

## 11. Limitations and future directions

Hypothetical vignettes adopted in research studies reflect certain limitations. In the first instance, vignettes have been valuable for the purposes of exploring people's perceptions, beliefs and interpretative meanings concerning sensitive situations [46], however findings are not founded on real world settings. Therefore, one serious limitation concerning this study's findings is that the relationship between participants' perceptions and their actual responses in real life is unknown. For this reason, scholars and policy makers cannot deduce from the findings of this study that participants would actually respond in the same way in real-life. To circumvent this problem, scholars could adopt a multi-method approach by using in-depth interviews to reduce a number of drawbacks that vignette-based studies cause. In the second instance, the study adopted a convenience sampling approach to carry out the recruitment of participants. According to Price [52], convenience sampling methods reflect several weaknesses. For this reason, enhancing future research findings by targeting particular cohorts for inclusion, specifically inner and outer social members of diverse groups who have previously supported bereaved men would be worthwhile as there is a strong need to research a diversity of perceptions within Australian society.

In addition, future researchers may combine qualitative and innovative methods such as Online Photo Voice (OPV), Online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA) and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approaches as another way to capture the thoughts, feelings, images and behaviours of men experiencing grief as well as members of the inner and outer social network who provide support. These innovative methods may deliver more effective support services [53] to men experiencing grief along with members of the inner and outer social network.

## 12. Researcher's reflexivity

As I was completing the analytic and interpretative component of this study, I realised the limitations of my interpersonal skills at helping men negotiate intrapersonal vulnerability. One salient memory sprang to mind when I heard my father, a stoic man, weep soon after he learnt of his father's passing. I remember my father bursting into his and my mother's bedroom where I could hear muffled screaming. My father wailing into pillows, attempting to minimise for others the volume and intensity of his suffering. I remember feeling confused and concurrently deep empathetic anguish: a feeling that can only be understood by a helpless other who intensely experiences the sorrows endured by someone they dearly love and care for. Now as I watch him in the dementia ward of a public hospital, tears dwell in his eyes in front for all to see. Perhaps dementia has some benefits after all. Perhaps I have learnt a thing or two as well—I simply hold his hand and let him tell me what he is thinking and feeling. He desperately misses my mother.

The stoic man can be misinterpreted as hard to help. We may not feel comfortable enough, even frightened at times to offer a warm hand of support. Upon reflection of my father's grief, I interpret his stoically formed socially constructed identity as a cry for help. Now, I can more acutely observe unexpressed grief hiding in the midst of a man's heart because I know a little more, even when they can't or don't want to see it themselves. How to help best, of course, remains the bigger question.

## 13. Conclusions

In summary, this study analysed people's perceptions of men's experience of grief in Australia, including both intra and interpersonal dilemmas that are plausibly faced by members of the inner and outer social network. The methodological approach consisting of social constructionism and thematic analysis enabled an exploration of participants' perceptions concerning a fictious character's experience of grief and how members of the inner and outer social network would respond when social behaviours are observed to reflect misalignment to hegemonic masculine norms within Australian society. The interpretative lens concerning participant responses enabled the researcher to expose the positions and quandaries participants took and construed concerning the inner and outer social network as per the study's three themes: work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men feel their grief, work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men think through their grief, and work with or against hegemonic masculinity to help men express their grief.

The study's themes exposed that supporting men through grief remains a delicate and complicated process in which collective effort is needed by scholars, policy makers and mental health clinicians, particularly when there is a high probability that non-adherence to the socialised gendered role will lead to stigma and further mental ill health outcomes for grieving men. For this reason, scholars, policy makers and mental health practitioners should increase collective efforts to provide both members of the inner and outer social network with useful and meaningful tools to support men to engage with their vulnerable emotions. To omit this important piece of collective work means that grieving men will need to continue to endure great mental ill-health challenges during times of immense intra and interpersonal change.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

TK—designed the research study; performed the research; analysed the data; wrote the manuscript; contributed to editorial changes in the manuscript; read and approved the final manuscript.

Research Ethics Committee, Project ID Reference Number: 35120. The Explanatory Statement explicitly conveyed to participants their implied consent was acknowledged when they completed their responses to the questions via Qualtrics. The Explanatory Statement summarised the purpose of the research comprising of the hypothetical vignette, survey questions and the dissemination of results. In addition, the Explanatory Statement provided information relating to Monash University's Ethics Committee in the event that participants required supplementary information concerning the study or had further questions.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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