

# **An Exploratory Study on the Grieving of the Bereaved Father in Hong Kong – from Grief Support Workers’ Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT:** Chinese culture expects men to be strong and capable of emotional restraint, and therefore, the grief of bereaved fathers is often being overlooked in Chinese society. However, there has been little research done to understand the emotions and needs of these grief-stricken men, especially from the observations and perspectives of support professionals. This exploratory study attempted to address the knowledge gap concerning the bereaved fathers in Hong Kong through interviews of grief support workers. The study aimed at studying the needs and the pattern of grief of these fathers, plus the effects of gender and cultural expectations on their grief expression. Appropriate support and interventions were also explored. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with five grief support workers who had substantial experience in providing support and counseling to bereaved fathers, and reflexive thematic analysis was used in the data analysis. Results of the study showed that the bereaved fathers in Hong Kong tend to maintain their toughness and invulnerability as circumscribed by society and cultural norms amid the loss. Also, behaviors associated with the instrumental pattern of grief are more commonly observed among bereaved fathers. With respect to professional interventions, grief support workers recognized the importance of both instrumental and intuitive pattern of grief when working with the bereaved fathers and indicated that they had greater success in engaging these fathers through culturally-sensitive practice by paying attention to the societal and cultural expectations on men and respecting the fathers’ preferred choice and priority in the grief process.

**KEYWORDS:** fathers’ grief, Chinese men, pattern of grief, Hong Kong, grief counseling, grief support workers, bereavement

## **Introduction**

The death of a loved one is one of the most difficult times in one’s life. The death of one’s beloved parents, family members and friends could be the direst moment one can encounter in their life (Lannen et al. 2008). Grief is one of the inevitable parts one will experience over life course. However, the death of one’s child is described to be a kind of death which the parents cannot be prepared for (Limbo and Davies 2015). The bereaved parents, since they bonded with the deceased biologically, are the ones who would naturally experience the most intense, devastating pain in the grieving process of the deceased child.

The number of bereaved mothers who felt the need of seeking help is higher than bereaved fathers (de Groot 2006). Chan and Cheung (2020) ascribed this phenomenon to the masculine stereotype of men as protectors. Although bereaved fathers tend not to seek help, they still suffer from the death of the child, such as self-blaming, fatherhood role confusion, desire for fatherhood role recognition and validation (Cacciatore et al. 2013). Nonetheless, there is very little research that focuses on the experience of bereaved fathers, and, as of this date, there is only a very few studies in Hong Kong focusing on the grief experience of bereaved men who lost their wife or children.

This exploratory qualitative study is intended to address this knowledge gap by focusing on the grief experience of bereaved fathers in Hong Kong and try to understand these men’s often unexpressed needs.

## Research Background

Literature in analyzing the difference between grief, bereavement and mourning are limited and the three terms are used interchangeably (Graves 1978). However, for this research, the definitions proposed by Worden (2018) will be used to distinguish the differences among the three concepts.

Grief refers to the experience of the loss of a loved one to death, including beloved human beings (Worden, 2018), or even pets (Redmalm 2015). The grieving experience is comprised of one's feelings, physiological reactions, behavioural reactions following a loss (Worden 2018). Mourning refers to the process where a person adapts to the loss (Worden 2018) and theorists tend to analyze the mourning process based upon stages, phases or tasks. Similar to the concept of grief, bereavement refers to the experience of losing someone close (Worden 2018).

It is almost inescapable that every individual will come across situations in which they are engaged in the grief of a loved one. Grief experiences vary among bereaved individuals, some may experience prolonged, intensive grief for years, while others may be able to move on from the passing of the deceased and work on the new challenges in life after a short period of grief (Bonanno and Kaltman 2001). According to a review of empirical evidence done by Bonanno and Kaltman (2001), 50 – 85% of bereaved individuals in the first year of bereavement would show emotional and behavioral patterns, similar to those of a common grief, a non-pathological situation defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.) (DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association 1994). And the common grief, for most of these bereaved individuals, will gradually subside by the end of the first year. Only about 15% of them will develop into chronic or complicated grief, which could bring up mental health issues, such as depressive disorder, anxiety disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In the study of the bereaved, the majority of research focused on grief originated from spousal loss (Maccallum et al. 2015), there is little research focused on bereaved parents. However, in a study, with a sample size of more than 2500, concerning the trajectories of depression following spousal and child loss by Maccallum et al. (2015), it was found that bereaved parents are more likely to develop chronic grief than widows or widowers, implying that the impacts caused by the loss of a child can often be more severe or long-lasting than the loss of a spouse. From a meaning-making perspective, losing a child could lead to a critical existential crisis in bereaved parents. People tend to look for meaning when encountering the loss of a loved one, and their quest is usually related to the three fundamental questions confronting the bereaved during the grieving process, namely, sense-making of the death, looking for insights from the experience and undertaking change of identity (Gillies & Neimeyer 2006).

As the younger generation ought to outlive their parents and the older generation (Bogensperger and Lueger-Schuster, 2014), the death of a child was a significant bereavement challenge for the parents as the event defies parents' assumptions towards the world and the objectives and meanings that related to the deceased child (Wheeler 2001). From a constructivist perspective, suffering from child-loss poses a profoundly difficult and existential challenge to parents. The bereaved parents need to reconstruct the meanings of an event that shook their sense of purpose, identity, the fundamental meaning of the life of the children, etc (Lichtenthal et al. 2010), as the meaning reconstruction may help to alleviate the suffering from the great loss.

In a systemic review regarding the impacts on women after stillbirth, it was found that many mothers would suffer from depressive disorder and/or PTSD due to the loss (Huberty et al. 2017). This research showed that the loss of children could be an extremely traumatic, devastating event for the parents.

However, many studies focused on the grief experience of mothers, and there have been very few which attended to the experience and the needs of bereaved fathers who may also suffer greatly from deep grief at the loss of a child (Cacciatore et al. 2013). In order to create more relevant support for fathers who have been confronted with this type of profound loss, it is worth to develop better knowledge through research about factors which may affect the emotional or behavioral expressions or account for the variations happening in the mourning process of bereaved fathers.

### ***A. Child loss as a disenfranchised grief for fathers***

Child loss is a type of disenfranchised grief in Hong Kong for a father. People are socialized to conform to different rules that are associated with expectations towards social roles in society. ‘Feeling rules’ are regulations that we learnt for emotional expressions socially, which control the way we are expected to sense (Doka 2017). Mourning, in front of others, for some types of the loss is considered more socially acceptable, such as the loss of parents, while doing the same for some other types of loss may not be regarded as socially desirable and hence, the associated grief may become disenfranchised. Disenfranchised grief is defined as “grief that a person experiences when it incurs a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported (Doka 1989, 4)”. Grief about child loss is often considered disenfranchised for a father partly because of the social roles a man is expected to assume.

Men are expected to be a protector of the family and are encouraged to suppress their feelings to show a masculine image. It was found by Kung (2003, as cited in Chan and Cheung 2020) that men perceive themselves as stronger when they can publicly control their emotional expressions. Restraining emotional expression is also being viewed as a virtue to promote interpersonal harmony (Yeung et al. 2015). According to Yeung et al., (2015), a tendency for men to suppress their emotions to fit into social expectations is called “emotional-control masculine norm”. This norm persists in many countries in the world, but it is found that Chinese men tend to have a higher unwillingness to emotional expressions than Caucasian men (Chia et al. 1994) and Chinese fathers are less expressive than American fathers emotionally (Hsu 1981, as cited in Yeung et al. 2015). The emotional-control masculine norm towards grief in men was reflected in Hong Kong samples (Chan & Cheung 2020) and the norm was also found to have a negative correlation with psychological well-being among Hong Kong Chinese men (Yeung et al. 2015). One of the causes of conformity towards this norm by men is due to the socialization process in their upbringing (Yeung et al. 2015). As emotional expressions are seen as a symbol of weakness, expressing grief for the loss of a child openly is discouraged and disenfranchised.

### ***B. Attitude towards death by society***

Traditional perceptions towards children’s death in a family also impact the mourning process of fathers. According to Huang and Wu (2008), traditional family viewed birth-giving as one of the most important functions of a family, and women was expected to give birth to children in order to inherit the family legacy. Chinese culture regards birth-giving as blessings to couples and families. There is a Chinese saying “He sees *loneliness if he is childless at his 40s, feels disrespected if he is childless at his 50s, tastes isolation if he is childless at his 60s, experiences real suffering if he is childless when he becomes old* (四十無子冷清清, 五十無子沒人敬, 六十無子斷六親, 老來無子真是苦) (Huang and Wu 2008, 96)”, showing that birth-giving carries crucial meanings to a person in Chinese culture. When a child passed away, Chan et al. (2005) found that the bereaved parents may blame themselves by thinking that the tremendous loss as the consequence of *Karma* and *Yuan* (緣). A very derogatory folk saying : ‘pass away without surviving children (無仔送終)’ also represents the worse curse that one could use to provoke or insult an individual or a family. As the death of children

would be seen as a deprivation of blessings, the stigma attaching to this tragic loss could inhibit the bereaved father to seek for help or support in their mourning process.

### ***C. Conceptual framework***

Grief work traditionally hypothesizes that ‘one has to confront the experience of bereavement to come to terms with loss and avoid detrimental health consequences (Stroebe and Schut 1999, 199)’. Therefore, under this perspective, a bereaved person who cries in despair, and seeks for emotional outlets would be viewed as positive actions in grief work, while a person who suppresses his/her feelings and chooses not to disclose would be considered as potentially problematic in grief. Hence, it is common that traditional grief work tends to categorize a lot of men, especially those who seem to be suppressing their feelings, as maladaptive grievers (Martin and Wang 2006).

Doka and Martin (2010) believed that expressions of grief were multifaceted and there was multiplicity in the adaptive strategies the bereaved individual used. They suggested two patterns for the individuals to respond to the loss, namely instrumental griever and intuitive griever, and the two patterns vary in two ways: their internal experience of grief and expression of that experience.

Doka and Martin (2010) classified the grieving style by putting the grievers along a spectrum of grieving with intuitive griever on one pole and the instrumental griever on the other pole. Intuitive grievers mainly express their grieving experience through sentiments, and intensely painful feelings make up a big part in their grief. Similar to the ‘normal’ griever in the traditional grief work hypothesis (Stroebe and Schut 1999), intuitive grievers may express their grief through open display of their intense sorrow and sadness, such as crying; and/or verbally sharing their emotions and other inner feelings with friends and relatives. Conversely, instrumental grievers devote most of their internal psychic energy from the loss to tasks or activities that are related to the cognitive domain. They prefer to resolve the problems brought to them after the loss rather than showing their painful feelings. With the concept of a spectrum in mind, there are no ‘pure’ intuitive grievers or instrumental grievers, and we can only distinguish grievers who are more intuitive than instrumental or vice versa. If an individual was found to exhibit both the elements of intuitive and instrumental patterns, that could be a manifest of the blended pattern of grief.

Doka and Martin (2010) believed that grievers even fall into a predominated grief pattern with this intuitive-instrumental grieving spectrum, had the need to express themselves in ways that may be atypical of their predominant pattern. For example, an instrumental griever has to look for an outlet for their painful feelings, and an intuitive griever has to discover ways to express their cognitive thoughts and to handle practical tasks (Doka and Martin 2010). Effective and adaptive strategies have to be found to facilitate the dominant way of grief expression, (i.e. cognition for instrumental pattern and feelings for intuitive pattern), and to explore complementary ways for the alternate grief expression, feeling expressions for the instrumental griever and cognitive-based activity for the intuitive griever. However, it should be stressed that the two patterns of grief are acceptable, and “no pattern is superior or inferior to the other (Doka and Martin 2010, 57).”

Therefore, this research aimed to solve the following questions: 1) What are the needs throughout the grieving process of bereaved fathers with different patterns of grief? and 2) How would the cultural practice or expectations towards men alter or affect the needs of the bereaved father throughout the grief experience?

### **Participants**

This study was designed as an exploratory study using a qualitative method. Informant-based in-depth interviews with grief support workers were arranged. Recruitment period started in early 2022, and 5 grief support workers were successfully recruited.

The key informants were selected based on their specialty in the grief counselling service. At the point of searching for key informants, there were three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing grief counselling services in Hong Kong (Lui 2020). Among the 5 key informants recruited, 4 came from two of the above NGOs, and one came from a children palliative care support organization in Hong Kong. The decision to use key informant interviews, instead of direct interviews of bereaved fathers in this research, is that the method is considered a reliable and feasible way to collect data that could still be capable of reflecting the general trend (Rubin and Barbie 2016), as original plan and attempts to recruit or engage bereaved fathers as subjects for qualitative interviews have not been successful.

Table 1. Participants

	Sex	Experience in grief counselling	Qualification
Participant A	Female	24 years	Registered Nurse
Participant B	Male	2 years	Registered Social Worker
Participant C	Female	4 years	Registered Social Worker
Participant D	Female	More than 10 years	Registered Social Worker
Participant E	Male	14 years	Registered Social Worker

## Methods

Four interviews were conducted with five participants, of which one was a joint interview. Each interview lasted for 30 to 60 minutes. Three of the interviews were accomplished through the ZOOM video conference platform, while the remaining one was conducted through telephone call. Participant A, D, E had separate individual interviews, whereas participant B and C participated in a single joint interview, per these participants' request.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The four key research questions that guided the interviews are:

1. Is a particular pattern of grief more typical in Chinese bereaved fathers – instrumental vs intuitive?
2. What are the needs of bereaved fathers with different patterns of grief?
3. How would the gender expectations or cultural practices towards men affect the needs of bereaved fathers? And
4. What were the intervention strategies or approaches that the key informants used in working with bereaved fathers?

## Thematic analysis plan

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes during the data analysis of the research. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the reflexive approach was selected, and the six stages suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022) were adopted in data analysis.

The data was first coded in the first stage. The interviews were transcribed into four transcripts on a word-by-word basis. We adopted an inductive coding approach, meaning that the coding process and the theme establishment are driven by the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). Code names were given to any data that might relate to the topic, on both semantic level, the explicit meaning of the data, as well as latent level, the implicit meaning of the data set (Braun and Clarke 2022). To ensure thorough coding and minimize the researcher's bias in initial coding, the whole coding process was repeated once more, and the sequence of the transcripts coded was randomly assigned in the second coding trial.

The data was cleaned in the second stage. All codes were entered into a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel. The same name was applied to codes with very similar meanings to improve

coding consistency. For an easier reference to analysis tracing, each version of transcript and code list were kept. A table on the total occurrences of different codes was generated to overview the patterns of the dataset statistically.

Themes were subsequently developed in the latter phase. In the reflexive approach, themes have to be distinctive and guided by a central organizing concept (Braun and Clarke 2022). Thematic map was developed to categorize codes into different sub-themes. The sub-themes were grouped into different candidate themes. The candidate themes were refined after discussion with the research supervisor and self-review. Eventually, there were four themes developed from the dataset out of this process.

## Results

The four themes that emerged are 1) child loss makes no sense to the fathers, 2) maintaining a strong-man image amid the loss, 3) grief pattern of the bereaved fathers, and 4) working with the bereaved fathers.

### *Theme 1: Child loss makes no sense to the fathers.*

All of the participants reported that bereaved fathers tend to view their child loss as an event that makes no sense, as the loss subverts parents' belief about life and its meaning. Losing a child challenges the very assumption that 'children ought to outlive their parents'. Participant E observed that nearly all parents, whom they have worked with, thought that their child-loss as an event which they could hardly comprehend and make sense of, due to the notion that 'no parent wants his/her offspring to pass away earlier than him/herself'. The loss also crumbled the father's values in their own lives.

“There is a father who lost his 14-year-old son to liver cancer, and the son is his only child. When he was informed with the diagnosis, he told me ‘Miss, I will never do any good deeds again’... He has been good to his family, but he didn't understand why his child would have such incurable disease. (Participant A)”

The workers revealed that some fathers regarded their children as a significant source of giving them the meaning of life. Providing good nurture to their child has always been their life's purpose. However, when their child passed away, their meaning of life was abruptly disrupted, causing a critical existential crisis. According to one of the participants, a bereaved father had once contemplated the idea of committing suicide because of disillusionment after the tragic loss.

“One of the clients told me ‘I no longer know what I am working for in my life. I worked hard to earn more money for my son's tuition and his flat after marriage.’ He didn't know what his life is for after his child's passing. (Participant A)”

Despite a child's death being an event which is hard to comprehend, two key informants noted that fathers with religious beliefs tended to overcome the grieving process in a more positive way. They believed that religions provided another perspective on viewing death. For example, a Christian parent believed that their son is their gift from God, and they have fulfilled their responsibility to nurture him until his passing.

“He (a bereaved father) said they don't think death as a permanent separation, and they believe they will meet their son again in the future. They emphasized their separation as temporary as they fulfilled the roles of parent that were given by God. (Participant C)”

Meanwhile, most participants in this research observed that younger fathers were less likely to view the loss as the consequence of karma, but this karma belief was more prominent among middle-aged and older-aged fathers. Participant A pointed out that for the believers of

karma, they might think that they might have done something wrong in their previous life, which caused them to lose their child in their current life.

However, most fathers would show feelings of guilt and self-blaming after the loss, while such feelings were less significant towards the loss of an adult family member. Among younger bereaved fathers, it seemed they were more likely to think that the total responsibility of bringing up a child rested with them and they might blame themselves for such losses, including criticizing or feeling regret towards their past decisions about child-rearing, such as ways of parenting, fulfilment of children's requests, or even the decisions to have children

### ***Theme 2: Maintaining a 'strong' man image amid the loss***

Participants in this research revealed that bereaved fathers seem to follow the social expectations of remaining calm and strong. Chinese culture believes that men need to be strong and not swayed by emotions, as they are the pillar of the family. Our participants observed that this group of fathers seemed to behave in accordance with cultural expectations. They believed that these fathers reminded themselves of being the leader, the protector and the breadwinner of their family. Since emotional expressions of men, especially in front of others, are often considered not socially appropriate, fathers might suppress or avoid display of strong emotions in order to maintain the image of the leader and the protector of a family.

“We always assume a father is the leader of his family, and we seek fathers' help whenever there are any challenges and problems. These made the father as a strong pillar of the family. (Participant C)”

“Father has the role of breadwinner and family leader in Chinese family. They have to protect their family pragmatically and emotionally. However, protecting his family doesn't mean they are capable of responding to their emotions. (Participant D)”

Key informants also pointed out that bereaved fathers tend not to reveal or acknowledge their emotional needs and therefore, their motivation to seek help for themselves is relatively low. They tend to reach for workers' help for funeral arrangement issues or worries about their families' emotions, rather than their own distress and needs. These are the typical coping behaviours of an instrumental pattern of grief, which will be discussed later.

“It is hard to reach bereaved fathers to share their experience of grief, as the gender role of men discourage them to express their emotions verbally (Participant C)”

“They (bereaved fathers) are not aware of their emotional needs. Instead, they would say 'Help my family, I am fine. If you can provide counselling to us, please do it with my family' (Participant E)”

### ***Theme 3: Grief pattern of the fathers***

The instrumental pattern of grief is more noticeable among bereaved fathers by key informants' report. Key informants commonly identified that bereaved fathers tend to adopt emotional suppression and cognitive measures during their grief.

Firstly, bereaved fathers are inclined to apply emotional suppression and avoidance in handling their grief. Suppression refers to the inhibitions of thoughts and feelings from grief (Hudson, 2016). Our research participants pointed out that fathers use suppression as coping, which is in line with social expectations. Also, one participant pointed out that the relational factors, such as the marital relationship, within the family may reinforce a bereaved father to resort to suppression in handling grief. Another participant postulated that the suppression of grief may develop into different types of obsessions, as means of escape or distraction from the loss, such as becoming workaholics, or developing gambling and alcohol addiction.

“Some fathers kept on apologizing to their wife during counselling. I can feel the emotions are not formed solely from the grief from child loss, but also mixed feelings from the marital relationship. (Participant D)”

“Men tended not to talk about these (emotions) with their friends. Women are more willing to talk, that’s why they could ventilate their emotions more effectively. Some of these men would suppress their emotions and turn into addiction, such as alcohol, gambling or use work to distract from the loss or to numb themselves of the pain. (Participant A)”

Apart from suppressing emotions, avoiding places or events that may trigger emotions relating to the child loss is also common. Key informants reported that some bereaved fathers may avoid mentioning the deceased child and also forbid the family from talking about the child. Some fathers have even refused to visit the grave of the child. Key informants described this kind of behavior as ‘avoidance’, which, they believe, is normal and not an atypical characteristic of male grievers.

The focus on solving tangible and practical problems as a form of grief expression is also common among bereaved fathers. As mentioned earlier, fathers tend to approach grief support workers when they are in need of help to solve practical issues arising from the loss, such as funeral arrangements or other tangible issues brought along by the loss. There were incidents where bereaved fathers may come to seek help because of their concerns about particular family members who they think could not manage their emotions due to the loss. An informant pointed out that in some cases they have supported, bereaved fathers accompanied their families to seek help as he was feeling guilty towards his wife for his inadequate care for or lack of time spent with the family before the child’s death. Another observation revealed by the key informants, is that when they were holding joint interviews with bereaved parents, it was often the fathers tended not to disclose or divulge their feelings and emotions because these fathers believed their family should be the ones who were actually in need and all the help or support should be directed to the family members.

“The utmost need (of these fathers) is need for information, as they want their problems and enquiries to be solved or answered. Secondly, the fathers are very concerned with their family, they care much about the emotions of family members rather than themselves... as the fathers don’t know how to address or support the emotions of his family (Participant E)”

Despite the instrumental pattern being more noticeable among fathers, key informants observed that some fathers they supported were adopting the intuitive pattern of grief. Participant B shared that he met a father who cried in nearly every session during the engagement phase of support. Participant C also pointed out that there was a father who was emotionally expressive, that he often cried when revisiting the loss, though the informant described that a father who displayed the intuitive pattern upon their first service contact was pretty rare.

“There was an outlier case in which the mother appeared tough and seldom cried, and she believed she has accepted the loss, while the father seemed very sentimental. He was the one who cried every night. I used to believe that the cultural expectations on gender play a role in it (the type of emotional expression), but (this case) shows me that there are exceptions that fathers could express in their own (unconventional) way. (Participant C)”

Participants of this research also reported that the intuitive expressions of grief could take place under certain circumstances, such as when the fathers are attending groups with other bereaved parents, and/or when bereaved fathers are feeling safe to express their emotions within a trusted worker-client relationship. And almost all participants believed that bereaved fathers have both instrumental needs and emotional needs while they are in grief.



“There was a men who came (to seek for support) for some practical issues, but when he joined a mutual support group, he shed lots of tears. It (father being an intuitive or instrumental griever) is not an ‘either-or’ question, but they will show different facets of grief under different circumstances (Participant D)”

“I started with my cases with problem-solving, then gradually moved on to attend to their emotional needs. When he (a bereaved father) brought a lot of questions to you, but instead of helping him to address these questions, you chose to asking questions pin-pointing his emotions. He would think that you could not or were not keen to help. No matter how skilful you are, you cannot offer him support if he is not willing to come back. I believe they have their emotional needs, but we have to beware of the approach or the biases when we intervene or offer help. (Participant E)”

#### ***Theme 4: Working with the bereaved fathers***

Firstly, in terms of the need for sense-making, one key informant shared that some bereaved fathers would attempt to derive new meanings in life through looking for actions that are meaningful to them, for example, regularly visiting their in-law parents. The same informant highlighted that bereaved fathers are inclined to show stronger motivation for actions that they could do for the deceased than for themselves.

“The fathers had lower motivation to do things for themselves, such as self-care. Nevertheless, if the event was linked with his deceased wife and child, he had a stronger motivation, for example, he understood that his wife wanted him to visit his mother-in-law regularly, then he would be more motivated to spend time with his mother-in-law. (Participant B)”

Another key informant (Participant A) mentioned the importance of early intervention to facilitate fathers’ sense-making process. She would attempt to include the child with the fatal disease in her intervention to address the fathers’ anticipatory grief. She discovered that the messages and gifts given by the dying child could help the bereaved fathers to make sense of the inevitable loss easier, as there could be fewer regrets and guilt for the fathers. Based upon suggestions offered by this informant, it appears that early and pre-grief intervention could be important for providing adequate support to these fathers. Participant A described that current bereavement service encourage the bereaved fathers to seek help only after the child passed away. Due to the socio-cultural expectations on men in society, participant A believed that this kind of service arrangement may exclude some male clients who are greatly in need of early support, as these fathers are often unaccustomed to reaching out for help. Therefore, Participant A believed that support services could engage these fathers while their child are receiving palliative or end-of-life care, so that the support workers could have more time to build trust and develop rapport with the fathers. Participant A suggested that early or pre-grief intervention could reach more fathers who are in this type of circumstances, especially she believed that many bereaved fathers may become difficult to engage after their child’s passing.

Secondly, it was suggested by the key informant interviews that support workers should often maintain their reflexivity in practice. Most informants shared that they need to have regular reflection on how gender role expectations are affecting bereaved fathers, as well as socio-cultural practice. They acknowledged that fathers’ grief is somewhat affected by society and cultural norms. For example, they were aware that in Chinese culture, ‘face-saving’ plays a crucial part in people's lives, especially for men, and it is pivotal to pay attention and respect this cultural need and characteristic while facilitating fathers’ emotional expression.

“I always remind myself not to side with the gender stereotypes about men shaped by society. We have to reflect on how the Chinese society adds burdens to men (through

gender role expectations), and we should not be one that reinforces these stereotypes. (Participant D)”

“Most of the men care about their ‘face’, and they are reluctant to show their vulnerable side to us, that’s why they keep on telling us that they are okay and capable of facing these (grief). Our role is not to tell them ‘they are not okay’, but to let them know that we would be available if they need us. (Participant E)”

The key informants also suggested that it is preferable to adopt a strength-based attitude when working with bereaved fathers. For example, they found it useful to focus on the contributions these fathers made to the family. Participant C believes that some families internalize the fathers’ role of being a strong protector and take the fathers’ role for granted, and often times family members and even the fathers themselves either overlook or fail to openly recognize and acknowledge the significance of fathers’ endurance and contributions in the family process, especially after the child- loss. In working with bereaved fathers, it is suggested that support workers would help fathers to identify and acknowledge their past or current contributions, including their efforts and resilience displayed during the grief process.

Most of the key informants agreed that bereaved fathers have both instrumental needs and emotional needs, despite variations in the relative degree of these needs. As grief support workers, these informants described that one of the key functions in this role is to act as facilitators to help bereaved fathers to express and to address both of these needs. However, they remarked that they would use different skills and measures when responding to the different needs.

Firstly, the informants emphasized that a good working relationship with bereaved fathers is important. As mentioned earlier, Participant A indicated that she would like to build rapport even if these fathers are in the anticipatory grief period. Besides, Participant E believed that building a good working relationship starts from the point when support workers actively respond to the presenting problems of the fathers. Participants E gave an example: if a bereaved father asked for help in solving practical problems, he would first support the father in resolving the problems being raised, which then helped to pave the way for tackling emotional issues or needs for which trust and a good working relationship were pre-requisites.

Secondly, Participant E, as a support worker, would create opportunities or suitable contexts for bereaved fathers to understand and express their grief emotions, such as inviting them to join mutual help groups.

He would also use different intervention methods to facilitate fathers’ awareness and understanding of their own grief. Sometimes, he would facilitate fathers’ emotional expressions indirectly, if he thought that was the way in which the fathers would feel more comfortable with, for example, inviting a bereaved father to describe his observations and concerns about other family members’ reactions during the grief, rather than revealing his own emotions towards the loss.

“I would not ask him ‘how do you feel’ directly, as he possibly could not answer this question. Instead, I will try to ask him about how he feels about the conditions of his family. I try to direct him to talk about OTHERS’s emotions, rather than HIS own. This is easier for men to talk about their emotions as they may share about their worries over the family, and this is how I try to start (helping him to become more cognizant of his own feelings) my intervention. (Participant E)”

Participant E mentioned that as fathers tend to focus more on the family rather than their own personal circumstances, he would first offer bereaved fathers some basic knowledge about how people grieve and ask if they were aware of anyone in their family displaying similar behaviors or emotions. And often, through that process, the father, himself, could be more aware of his own grief.

Another interesting point brought up in the key informant interviews, is that during COVID-19 pandemic, lots of hospital services and operation have been cancelled or constrained, and Participant A pointed out that bereavement care has also been greatly affected and cannot be optimized under threats of the pandemic. The ban on hospital visits has complicated the grief of the bereaved. Firstly, the process of getting diagnosed till the completion of funeral rituals has been compressed, especially for COVID-19 patients due to various restrictions. She believes that this situation has rendered more hardships and complications for bereaved families to grieve for the loss.

At the same time, the ban on hospital visits caused the support workers more difficulty initiating early intervention. Participant A was aware that there have been international discussions on the needs for palliative care for COVID-19 patients, but there are limited discussions relating to challenges faced by grief support workers under the COVID-19 pandemic being brought up in Hong Kong.

## **Discussion**

The findings provide insights on the characteristics of bereaved fathers from the grief support workers' perspectives, as well as highlighting possible interventions used by the grief support workers to work with this group of fathers in Hong Kong.

### ***Question 1: Is a particular pattern of grief more typical in Chinese bereaved fathers?***

Based on the data collected from the key informants in this research, it seems that behaviours featuring the instrumental pattern of grief are more commonly observed among bereaved fathers in Hong Kong. Doka and Martin (2010) placed different patterns of grief along a continuum with two ends, namely, the pure instrumental pattern and the pure intuitive pattern. They believed that men are more likely to display the instrumental pattern of grief, and that the three core characteristics of instrumental grievers are: i) focus on cognition, ii) mastering emotions and showing reluctance to talk about feelings, and iii) problem-solving activity (Doka and Martin 2010). This postulation seems to be consistent with our findings from this exploratory study. According to our key informants, the common behaviours of bereaved fathers shown after the child loss seem to focus on solving practical or tangible tasks arising from the loss, such as funeral arrangements and the emotions of their family members. Also, it is quite common for these fathers to suppress or avoid emotions, particularly during the loss impact phase.

However, our key informants also observed that not all bereaved fathers they had encountered adopt the instrumental pattern. There were a few exhibiting behaviours that were more typical of the intuitive pattern of grief, such as crying. From our findings, gender role expectations could exert a strong influence on bereaved fathers, such as suppressing their emotions as a way to highlight their role as protector of the family. Nevertheless, our informants also cautioned that 'typical' does not mean 'invariable', and echoed with Doka and Martin (2010) that practitioners should not assume without assessment that any male griever is instrumental.

Similarly, 'typical' also does not mean 'permanent'. Participant B mentioned that there was a bereaved father he supported, who exhibited a strong urge to express emotions at the very beginning of the intervention, but such intense urge became weaker months after the loss. This showed that one's pattern can change over time. Doka and Martin (2010) believed that an individual's grief pattern has to be re-evaluated every few weeks, so it is just reasonable to think that the pattern of grief a father adopts is not unchanging. Although this research did not follow the change of grief pattern longitudinally, practitioners should not miss possible pattern changes in grief when applying the model.

***Question 2: What are the needs of the bereaved fathers with different patterns of grief?***

Firstly, the fathers seemed to have a great need to make sense of the child loss. From the qualitative data of this study, child loss is an event that bereaved fathers appeared having great difficulty to make sense of. It challenges the fathers' core beliefs as well as subverts their perceived meanings in life. The key informants believed that bereaved fathers have a great need to make sense of the death. This assertion is in line with the findings by previous literatures, such as sense-making as the need of the bereaved (Gillies and Neimeyer 2006), the child loss challenged the fathers' belief and meaning of life (Bogensperger and Lueger-Schuster 2014; Wheeler 2001; Lichtenthal et al. 2010).

Secondly, our data also reflect that these fathers seemed to have the need for the recognition of their past and ongoing contributions, and this need was often overlooked by their family due to societal expectations for men. According to our informants, the feelings of guilt and self-blame vary among bereaved fathers. The informants noted that some fathers had deep regrets and tended to blame themselves for the loss or things that they had not done when the deceased child was still alive. When we tried to find plausible explanation to this reported phenomenon, it seemed that it is important to understand the issue from the relational aspects of self-blame and guilt. Yeung et al. (2015) found that Hong Kong men are conforming the Chinese cultural norm to suppress their emotions in order to maintain their 'strong-men' image, and Chan and Cheung (2020) found that bereaved men attempt to maintain their toughness by not showing grief emotions. Our informants furthered that the cultural norm not only affects the fathers, but also the way other family members are able to recognize and acknowledge the contributions made by the fathers. In other words, in some families, the self-blame and guilt in these fathers may be exacerbated by other family members' attitude or response, as those family members may take these fathers' contributions for granted while blaming the fathers for their inadequate care for the family, especially for the time when the deceased child was still alive. This analysis may help to provide a new contextual understanding of bereaved fathers' grief and self-blame.

Thirdly, our data suggests that bereaved fathers seem to have the need to develop their unique ways to express their grief instrumentally and intuitively. Doka and Martin (2010) emphasized that both instrumental and intuitive patterns are equal and each type of griever has the need to express themselves in ways that may be opposite to their dominating pattern. Most of the key informants in our study agreed that bereaved fathers could have both their instrumental and intuitive needs during grief. The role of grief support workers in interventions is perhaps to facilitate fathers' searching and developing their unique ways to respond to both needs.

***Question 3: How will the gender role expectations or cultural practices towards men affect the grief of the bereaved fathers?***

Firstly, our key informants observed that many of the fathers maintain a 'strong' or 'tough' image amid the loss. The fathers were socialized to view themselves as the head, the protector and the breadwinner of the family. The idea is similar to the fathers in traditional family culture (Kwok et al. 2013). Society views emotional expressions as weak or vulnerable actions (Yeung et al. 2015). And our informants also observed that some of the bereaved fathers they had worked with had adopted suppression and avoidance in order to maintain their 'strong-father' image.

Chan et al. (2005) pointed out that Chinese people often regard the cause of death as the consequence of *karma* and *yuan*, and attempted to attribute the cause of death to the control of higher power. However, our informants indicated that the younger bereaved fathers were less likely to regard the cause of death as the actions of a higher power or supernatural force, or to consider the tragic deaths as the consequence of *karma* and *yuan*. Our thematic analysis shows that such beliefs seemed to be more prominent in middle-aged or older-aged fathers.

***Question 4: What are the intervention strategies the worker used in working with bereaved fathers?***

Traditional grief work theories consider effortful emotional expressions as the only means to overcome grief (Stroebe and Schut 1999). With this approach, bereaved fathers who are adopting the instrumental pattern could be seen as maladaptive grievers. However, this assertion is not well-supported by our findings. Instead, the qualitative data of this study shows that bereaved fathers exhibiting both instrumental and intuitive pattern were common and probably beneficial. Our informants reiterated that it is important to hold an accepting and open-minded attitude towards the grief behaviors bereaved fathers used in responding and managing the loss, and at the same time maintaining sensitivity as well as demonstrating flexibility in supporting both the fathers' instrumental and intuitive needs.

Doka and Martin (2010) pointed out three possible reasons for the instrumental grievers to look for professional help. Firstly, as grief works emphasize emotional ventilations as the dominant and preferred method during grief, the instrumental grievers may seek help to reassure their way of grieving being seen as normal. Second, they seek help as different patterns of grief emerged within the family, and the instrumental grievers want to resolve possible conflicts between family members. Third, the instrumental grievers want to explore different and possible coping strategies and to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages in adopting different strategies.

Our informants offered additional and feasible advices regarding intervention strategies when working with the bereaved fathers, and some of these advices seem particularly relevant for bereaved fathers who present the instrumental pattern of grief.

Firstly, as these fathers are often difficult to engage after the child death, early-intervention, which could start in the period of anticipatory grief is suggested. This may help to lessen guilt and regrets in these fathers and paving way for subsequent bereavement care. Creating memorial books and reading letters to the parents written by the critically-ill child may be possible methods to engage and prepare fathers or parents who would soon to face the tragic loss.

Secondly, culturally sensitive practice should be encouraged when working with bereaved fathers. The sensitivity towards relevant cultural issues and gender-role expectations, such as the "face-saving" tradition, and the cultural conception of masculinity have to be properly integrated into the grief support work when helping bereaved fathers and family to grieve.

Finally, individualization is crucial in the grief work practice. Accepting and respecting a bereaved father's preferred way of grief expression; and supporting him according to his dominating pattern of grief at a particular phase of grief or mourning would make the intervention or support more engaging and effective.

There is a different case, though not about a bereaved father, shared by Participant E which could serve a good reminder of the last advice.

"There was a men who lost his elder brother came to me. He shared that other counsellors he met often make him feel uncomfortable, as they always asked about his emotions, even after he showed his reluctance to the counsellors about sharing his feelings. I am aware of this (his unwillingness to talk about emotions), and I try to ask the same question at the beginning of every session – 'What you would like to share today? You can talk about everything you want.' ... I gave him the leading role of the conversation, even if he didn't talk anything about his grief in that session. It's okay. (Participant E)"

**Limitations and conclusion**

There are a few limitations of this research that we would like to point out. Firstly, the qualitative nature of the study and the method of analysis on the grieving process of the bereaved fathers would be difficult to offer a representative picture about bereaved fathers,

and therefore readers have to be cautious about the generalizability of the findings. This research adopted informant-based interviews in data collection. The cases shared in the interviews were selected and interpreted by the grief support workers, and therefore these are information not coming directly from bereaved fathers, which may not form exact pictures reflecting the feelings and thoughts in this group of fathers. Doka and Martin (2010) has pointed out that it has been observed that instrumental grievers tend not to seek help, which implies that the bereaved fathers who seek help may only represent a minority portion of the bereaved fathers. Therefore, the findings from this study regarding the grieving process of the fathers are considered exploratory in nature and may not be able to represent all bereaved fathers in Hong Kong.

Also, the target of this study is to focus on only one of the bereaved parents, which may miss out the contextual complexity of the bereaved fathers. It is believed that greater insights could be generated if the research could also cover the other marital partner and the interpersonal dynamics of bereaved families, for example, investigating how the marital relationship and parent-child relationship affect the grief of fathers. Therefore, family-based research could be conducted in future in order to capture the contextual complexity within the event of child loss.

Future studies may attempt to adopt a longitudinal research format to capture the possible change of the pattern of grief in these fathers along the grieving process. Besides, future research focused on the bereaved fathers could study the age factor of the deceased child, as it may offer us more specific information and knowledge of the different impacts as well as the diverse needs of the bereaved fathers that are associated with the age of the deceased child when the death happened.

### Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for Prof. Wallace Chan, Dr. Joanne Leung, Dr. Fiona Chang, Mr. L.F. Chan and the interviewees who acted as key informants for their genuine help and contribution to this project.

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