Tucked in My Heart: The Use of Ethnopoetry To Represent the Meaning-Making of Social Workers in Pediatric Palliative Care

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to identify the social work perception of the psychosocial needs of dying children and their families in order to develop a best practice model of care and a syllabus to train current and future social workers. Drawing on the practice knowledge of pediatric oncology social workers currently providing end-of-life care to children and families, quantitative and qualitative methods were used to identify current practices used by and the training given to social workers with respect to end-of-life care for children with cancer. Complete results from the study are presented elsewhere. Presented here is a sliver of the data that were analyzed with ethnopoetic methodology to understanding how pediatric oncology social workers “make meaning” of their clinical practice with dying children and their families.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING AND METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data from a survey of 131 social workers were analyzed using two distinct methods: template analysis and ethnopoetry. Ethnopoetry, a qualitative interpretivist method of data analysis was chosen because of the researcher’s aim to use the data to stimulate discussion, emotional reaction and new understandings of the work of pediatric oncology social workers. This method was also chosen because of its potential for expression of complicated emotional experiences.

The poem entitled, Tucked in My Heart: Tales of Pediatric Oncology Social Work was created from the responses to the question, “How do you make meaning out of the losses that you face?” The actual words of the poem emerged from the researcher’s immersion in the data. Themes were selected that were both consistent and contradictory in nature. The researcher used practice knowledge of the subject and the participants to lift phrases out of the data that would be likely to represent the experiences of pediatric oncology social workers.

MEMBER CHECKING

At the Annual Conference of Pediatric Oncology Social Workers on April 29, 2003, the ethnopoem was presented to the population from which the sample was drawn. Respondents indicated that this representation of research was accurate, moving and healing. Discussion of the poem continued for the next few days of the conference. The feedback was tremendously positive. This feedback represents positive member checking to “validate” the content and form of representation.
it is very painful
I don’t always make meaning.
It is unjust
that these wonderful children die young.

I comfort myself
with their short lives
they live on in our memories

There is no rhyme or reason,
it is as it is supposed to be
. . . I have to trust that.
This is a work in progress

You will drive yourself crazy
trying to make meaning
out of everything
Some things happen
that we have no control over.

meaning comes out of
individual lives
their impact
on me and others.

Letting go
of the need
to have it “make sense”

INTERPRETATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Ethnopoetry as a form of data representation
worked for the goals of this research reporting.
The poem was evocative of emotions; it created
conversations and new understandings; it au­
thentically represented the experiences of the par­
ticipants; it offered a place for the participants to
reflect upon themselves and their work; and ac­
cording to members, it provided some comfort.

REFERENCE

1. MacNeil C. The prose and cons of poetic representa­
tion in evaluation reporting. Am J Evaluation

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