

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 understand 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 re-

action 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.¹ 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.¹

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.

FINDINGS

*Tucked in my Heart: Tales of Pediatric
Oncology Social Work**Barbara Jones, Ph.D., MSW
Copyright 2003**I have been given
a gift
It is the children I have known**Every life has a purpose
And I must
learn as much as I can
I am thankful for the gifts**to know each child
Each leaves an impression
on my life
and I am thankful**I feel honored and blessed
To have helped
in some way
hopefully
to ease their pain
in the process.**I cherish the pleasures/
everyday gifts of life.
This is the hardest part
There must be a plan**precious journeys
regardless of the outcome
Sometimes patients do survive!
This helps so much in the midst of losses.**honor the time
tuck it in my heart
focus on the gift**I draw on my faith.
My faith in God
I don't know why
these children die
I know God is always there.**I am able to be there
for the kids
and families.
I keep what they have taught me.**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 authentically represented the experiences of the participants; it offered a place for the participants to reflect upon themselves and their work; and according to members, it provided some comfort.

REFERENCE

1. MacNeil C. The prose and cons of poetic representation in evaluation reporting. *Am J Evaluation* 2000;21:359-367.

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