Abstract

Title: Fallen Leaves: On Coping with the Loss of Small Children (Fallna löv. Om coping vid förlust av små barn)

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Key words: psychological trauma, stress, traumatic stress, dissociation, social support, network support, coping, disclosure, appraisal, discourse, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, death, sudden death, perinatal death, loss, recovery, coping with loss, attachment, cultural models, narration, social exclusion, grief, bereavement, crisis, posttraumatic stress disorder, taboo, attribution of meaning, attribution of control, selfhelp, support group.

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Sweden has the world's lowest infant mortality rates. Despite this, according to Statistics Sweden, 816 children under the age of one died in 1997, 33 of these as a result of sudden infant death syndrome (cot death). This means an annual number of family catastrophes which is close to the number of people who died when the Estonia sank. This thesis, "Fallen Leaves: On Coping with the Loss of Small Children", studies how parents come to terms with the disaster that the death of a child involves, how they cope with destruction and repair the trauma.

The loss of a child is the most devastating of all losses (Bowlby 1980). Kleber & Brom (1992) declare that "the death of one's own child is the most harrowing loss. ... Especially when the death is caused by sudden infant death syndrome". The loss of a child is a traumatic experience, which can have a debilitating effect on the parents for a considerable time. The thesis examines the mechanisms of trauma and the repair of the destruction it causes.

The study has a qualitative approach. It follows the path of discovery (Glaser & Strauss 1967), but without ignoring existing knowledge. The aim is to examine the loss from a parental perspective. The empirical point of departure is narratives of loss and recovery as told by five pairs of parents. A theoretical selection was made together with the consultant at the Parents' Cot Death Association. The parents' narratives have been analysed on the basis of the following questions.

What does the trauma destroy and how? oHow is it repaired? -How is social support mobilized? -How does a supportive network influence construction of meaning and control?

The analysis tackles the three main questions of the thesis under the headings "Destruction", "Coping", and "Repair". It is obvious that destruction precedes repair. In the analytical model, coping has an intermediate position between the forward movement of repair and the chaotic dissolution of time and place caused by destruction. Coping is intended to stop the destructive effect of trauma, while in relation to life and the future the purpose of coping is repair. The general theoretical perspectives are operationalized in an analytical model in which the concept of coping (Folkman & Lazarus 1978) plays a major role. The concept of disclosure
(Pennebaker 1995) has proved to function particularly well. The final part thematizes the attribution of meaning to a situation that is initially unreal, incomprehensible, unfathomable. In addition, the experience of the helper is thematized as a central factor for establishing and functioning in a healing interaction.