

THE EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF IN A CHILD ORPHANED BY THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19

Daniela Ponciano Oliveira¹, & Izabella Barros²

¹Academic Master's Program Degree of Psychology, Federal University of Pará (Brazil)

²Professor of the Program Degree of Psychology, Federal University of Pará (Brazil)

Abstract

In the context of Covid-19, talking about mourning and death acquires even greater repercussions, with the advent of the pandemic and the frightening number of deaths, especially in adults and the elderly. The urgency of thinking about the situation of orphanhood was revealed, since thousands of children and adolescents lost mothers, fathers, legal guardians and/or other relatives, and many of them started to live in a situation of great vulnerability, a situation that must be considered to be a matter of public health emergency. The sudden death of family members, as can occur due to Covid-19, due to its potentially traumatic nature, can generate numerous challenges for children. Based on this assumption, the objective of this study was to know the expression of mourning in its biopsychosocial statutes in a child orphaned by the Covid-19 pandemic through interviews and the Drawing Procedure Story with Theme and free drawing. It was a qualitative, exploratory research, characterized as a clinical case study, with a psychoanalytical approach. The study complied with all the ethical requirements established in the resolutions that regulate research involving human beings and with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee. A 09-year-old child, who went through a situation involving the death of her mother due to Covid-19, and an older sister who took care of her, participated in this study. Four meetings were held with the child, one for each collection procedure. For the analysis of the data resulting from the application of the projective technique, it was used in the procedure manual for Drawing Story with Theme. For the integration of data and construction of the clinical case, the psychoanalytic theory, especially Winnicott's contributions, supported the articulations. As a result, it is understood that the symptoms that a child may experience soon or long after the loss of who exercises the maternal function, can have repercussions in all fields of their development. Thus, the study brings findings about the biopsychosocial expression of the bereaved child, the experience of family mourning and finds secondary losses as a complicating factor. Thus, in the grieving process, it is necessary for the child to experience the feelings and be able to get in touch with the fantasies that result from the loss. From these data articulated to psychoanalytic theory, it was possible to think that the work of mourning can benefit from the child's ability to create a transitional space where there is the possibility of reconstructing reality through a creative and spontaneous impulse, even in conditions difficulties such as mourning the death of the mother. Finally, the need for an interdisciplinary look in the care of the bereaved child is highlighted.

Keywords: *Grief, child, death, pandemic, Winnicott.*

1. Introduction

Death is a complex process to be faced, which is often crossed by feelings of sadness and anguish. Talking about mourning and death, in the context of Covid-19, has a much greater impact, and the psychological effects were even more intense (Penariol & Flores, 2021). With the advent of the pandemic, the frightening number of deaths, especially in adults and the elderly, revealed the urgency of thinking about the situation of orphanhood, since thousands of children and adolescents lost mothers, fathers, legal guardians or other relatives, and began to live in very difficult situations and without support, whether financial or psychological, a scenario that must be understood as a public health issue (Rodrigues, 2022).

The sudden death of family members, as can occur due to Covid-19, in addition to being traumatizing, can generate numerous challenges for children and adolescents, such as: dealing with the moment of pain and grief, often without support to express their grief ; the impact of the death(s) on the

situation family finances; the increase in the incidence of street children and orphans; the increase in emotional disorders, for example depression and anxiety, in people who survived; the drop in school performance; among other consequences that can persist into adulthood (Hillis et al., 2021; Nakajima et al., 2022).

The consequences of the death of those who care for the child go beyond the moment of mourning, and can have serious repercussions on their development, especially for those most vulnerable, where the loss of a family member of reference can result in several consequences. privations, (Winnicott, 2019/1987).

Children bereaved by the loss of a father and mother may be more vulnerable to disorders even in childhood and adulthood, and early interventions can prevent some of the difficulties and dysfunctions suffered by bereaved children (Bowlby, 2002a). It is even more challenging when a parent's death is sudden (as we saw in the Covid-19 pandemic). A series of changes inherent to the disappearance of the person who died, the child also loses the family dynamics the way they were before from the point of view of places and positions in the relationship (Franco & Mazorra, 2007).

Regarding the loss of the main caregiver, it is important to explain that the first and most persistent affective bond is usually with the mother (who exercises the maternal role), a bond that not even death dissociates. The loss of parents and, consequently, the mourning resulting from this loss can provoke in the child a need to search for a transitional object and a potential space where the pain can be expressed (Winnicott, 1996, 1999, 2007).

For Winnicott (2020b) creativity is the basis of healthy living. In this sense, enabling the bereaved child to express creativity becomes a very important moment for the constitution of the subject and for the continuity of his development. Thus, it is possible to think that the work of mourning can happen through the ability to create even in difficult conditions, making the suffering child find a transitional space and feel again that life is worthwhile (Barone, 2004) .

In this way, playfulness and creativity can be possible outlets for expression and communication with the bereaved child, such as playing, drawings and narratives such as tales, stories and fables (Affonso, 2009a; Paiva & Kovács, 2008) . Playful and projective resources allow access to the child's fantasies and unconscious conflicts as they enable the expression of affections and thoughts, opening up so that one can know their psychic functioning and their experiences in the face of a situation of mourning and orphanhood as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (de Mello & Baseggio, 2013; Gascon et al., 2012).

2. Objective

To know the expression of mourning in its biopsychosocial statutes in a child orphaned by the Covid-19 pandemic through interviews and the Story Drawing Procedure with Theme.

3. Method

In order to investigate the representation and expression of grief experienced by orphaned children due to the mother's death by Covid19, this research is characterized as qualitative, exploratory, cross-sectional and which was operationalized through a clinical case study supported by psychoanalytic theory.

In addition, it met all the ethical requirements established in the resolutions that regulate research involving human beings, obtaining approval opinion No. 5,781,809 from the Research Ethics Committee. A 9-year-old child participated in this study, who went through a situation involving the death of her mother due to Covid-19, and an older sister who took care of her.

A meeting was held with the guardian to carry out the semi-structured interview. With the child, 4 meetings were held, in which the Procedure of Drawings and Stories with Theme (DE with Theme) was carried out, which consists of asking the child to draw and tell stories about a certain proposed theme. After the phases of drawing and telling stories, the "survey" is carried out and the title is requested (Trinca, 2020).

Bearing in mind that drawings are a way for children to express their fantasies, desires and experiences, the use of these resources aims at instrumentalizing their communication possibilities. Story with Theme. For data integration and construction of the clinical case, psychoanalytic theory, especially winnicottian contributions, supported the articulations.

4. Discussion

The study under analysis refers to the case of a 9-year-old female child, which we will call Luna¹. Luna's mother died of Covid-19 in early 2022 after a 3-day hospitalization period. Luna resided with her mother and her 4 siblings. After her mother's death, she moved in with her older sister, 19-year-old Luana. Due to her mother's death, her other siblings moved to different cities.

In the first contact with Luana, responsible for the child, despite having shown herself willing to participate in the research, her speech demonstrated the use of the defense mechanism of denial from which she repeatedly emphasized that everything was fine, that she and her sister were well and happy. This demonstrated that, in addition to the experience of mourning the mother's death, these statements denounced a possible even greater fear of once again dealing with the possibility of a new loss, similar to that experienced by the distancing of her siblings.

The interview with the person in charge, in addition to data collection, was also intended to offer a place where that grief could be put into words, could function as a listening space, thinking about the holding of the holding, that is, to offer beware of the bereaved caregiver who needs to take care of a bereaved child. Thus, Luana was able to talk about the fear of losing her siblings, the fear of not being able to take care of Luna, how much she was suffering from the lack of her mother, her loneliness when experiencing all this without family and social support.

Luana, as she is also experiencing mourning for the loss of her mother, has difficulty offering holding and care for her sister, as she is also sad and shaken. Thus, as a way of working with the feelings of loss, the child tends to repeat the behaviors of the caregivers (Lima and Kovács, 2011), when Luana denies the repercussions of the events and feelings in the face of the loss, the child tends to deny it too, repressing the feelings of loss. feelings.

Those who take care of the child, after the loss of the mother, may have difficulty sharing their feelings. Luana, in her report, emphasizes this anguish in sharing her suffering with her sister, and her silence reflects on Luna's way of expressing her grief. As for Luna's questions regarding the loss, Luana reports that *"today she doesn't ask anymore, I thought it was good that she didn't ask anymore, because I don't even like to bring up this subject with her, because when I do I get sad. Imagine her!"*. The fantasy that one cannot talk about death made Luna inhibit her questions about death and loss. Thus, when adults remain silent, the understanding of death and the emotions associated with the loss of the child may be impaired (Winnicott, 1958/2012).

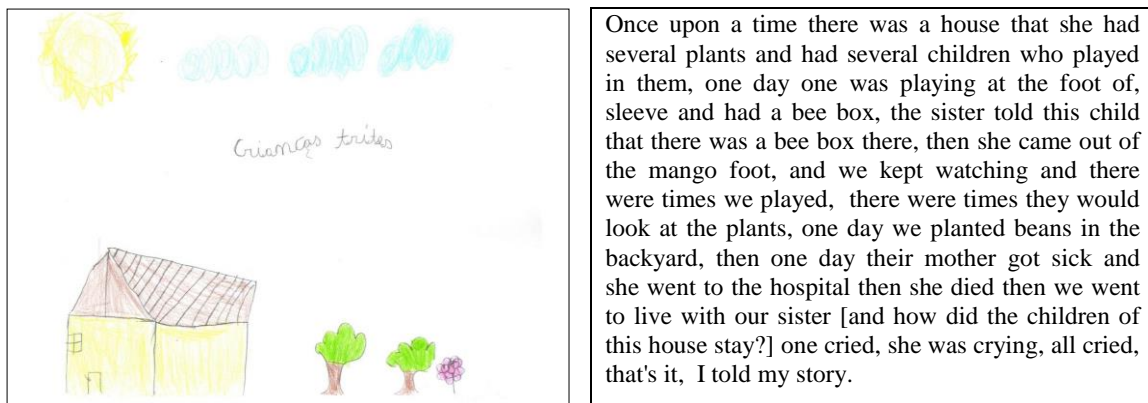
Faced with the non-answer to some questions about the loss, silencing becomes Luna's privileged way of communicating *"she stays in the room more"*, avoiding expressing her feelings and inhibiting herself in the face of grief. Communication arises a posteriori through the phobic symptoms of the fear that at any moment someone may die a sudden death (such as the loss of their mother by Covid-19), or that they may suddenly receive bad news, or even fear reported by Luana that the child began to be alone: *"she was afraid of sleeping alone and is afraid of the dark, if I go out she wants to go with me because she doesn't want to be alone"*. In addition, Luana describes bodily expressions such as *"agitation"*, which, according to the literature (Lima and Kovács, 2011), often reflect difficulty in the process of symbolization, and it is common in bereaved children for their feelings to be manifested through the body. Regressed behaviors, social and academic losses and the maintenance of a fantasy relationship with the dead person through the internalization of pain are also described by the literature as common behaviors in bereaved children.

The experience of loss is complicated not only by the family's inability to communicate their feelings, but also because in the death of a loved one, many other losses occur. Green (1988) stated that this situation is characterized as a grief *"wrapped"* in another grief, as a loss represents many other secondary losses that lead to a need for readaptation and changes. Luna, in addition to her mother's death, which in itself is already potentially traumatic, experienced the estrangement from her siblings, moving house, the (dis)configuration of family.

For children, who are still developing, this is an even more difficult adaptation, since a child who has lost a mother will possibly also lose, even if for a short period of time, the feeling of belonging to a family. As it was possible to perceive in the analysis of the case, in which the secondary losses made Luna experience the grieving process even more lonely, with even less external support, without having the opportunity to share the same feeling of *"sad children"* with their siblings.

¹ Fictitious name in order to preserve the identity of the participant.

Figure 1. Drawing Story.



In the grieving process, it is necessary for the child to experience the feelings that arise from it. Therefore, during the meetings, through the projective material, Luna was able to express what she was feeling, and express her fantasies, with death content, as well as her mourning. In the set of the Drawing-Story technique, she expresses her process of elaborating the loss of her mother, moving from the feeling of unnamable loss to perceiving herself as part of the story.

Even in the face of so many losses, it was possible to see signs of hope, as Luna expressed her feelings. Despite the fragility of the new home, after all the changes experienced in her family environment resulting from her mother's death, she expresses the desire to recover her family, rescuing in her older sister, the role of mother in this new family. Thinking about the experience of a possible grief for the child, Bowlby (1997) emphasizes the importance of the child having a person who acts as a permanent substitute, so that when accepting the loss as being irremediable, he can, through this new figure of care, reorganize your inner life. Thus, in cases of loss due to death, the child can embark on a reconstruction movement to recover his family, especially the figure of care.

Luna also demonstrates to find hope in the school environment, a place where she felt safe to be creative, described by her as an environment where she could play and spend time, perceives the external environment as a possible collaborator in her development and the school environment, appears as a facilitator of this development, representing the hope of spontaneous expression.

The ability to be spontaneous and connect fantasy with reality (using transitional passages) facilitates working through feelings of grief. With the expression of mourning through creativity, Luna can guarantee the memory of the deceased mother without having to deny the loss, which allows the re-signification of feelings without compromising the continuity of the feeling of being (the self and emotional development), to the detriment of the need to do (Barone, 2004).

5. Conclusions

The experience of experiencing the death of a family member due to Covid-19 in a context of many changes has a dimension that can interfere with the mourning of the people involved. Due to the context of the pandemic and its specificities, the most frequent deaths, many of them abrupt, without the possibility of being experienced through the rituals with which our culture is familiar (wake and burial), directly reflect how this mourning will be expressed and experienced: abruptly and interrupted.

With the completion of the research, it was possible to understand that for the bereaved child, it can be difficult to deal with the loss of those who exercise the care function, because in addition to having to deal with the sadness of the maternal loss, the confused feelings and the family changes can exacerbate their state of helplessness.

Since it is a very painful reality to lose your mother during the pandemic, the way to find a way to reconcile with her may be through the use of creativity and the ability to symbolize, acquired in transitional experiences (in which the internal world and the external world can interact). Thus, the contributions of this study reveal that with regard to the experience of the loss of the mother, the fantasies and the creative potential of the children can work as an attempt to reframe the suffering, elaborate the mourning and express their painful feelings.

Thus, the study brings findings about the biopsychosocial expression of the bereaved child, namely: the experience of family mourning, the aggravating factor brought about by secondary losses, the difficulty of finding support in an environment transformed by the sudden loss of family configuration,

feelings of helplessness and phobic and psychosomatic symptoms. Thus, in the grieving process, it is necessary for the child to find space to experience feelings and be able to get in touch with the fantasies that result from the loss.

Based on these data articulated with psychoanalytic theory, it was possible to think that the work of mourning can benefit from the child's ability to create a transitional space where there is the possibility of reconstructing reality through a creative and spontaneous impulse, even in difficult conditions such as mourning the death of the mother. Finally, the need for an interdisciplinary look at the care of the bereaved child is highlighted, since the death of one of the parents, and in particular the mother, can lead to adverse outcomes throughout life. Orphaned children are more vulnerable to emotional and behavioral problems, which requires intervention programs to mitigate the biopsychosocial consequences of orphanhood.

References

- Affonso, R. M. L. (2009). *Ludodiagnóstico: Investigação clínica através do brinquedo*. Artmed Editora.
- Barone, K. C. (2004). *Realidade E Luto: Um Estudo da Transicionalidade*. Casa do Psicólogo.
- Bowlby, J. (1977). A formação e ruptura de vínculos afetivos: I. Etiologia e psicopatologia à luz da teoria do apego. *O jornal britânico de psiquiatria*, 130 (3), 201-210.
- Bowlby, J. (1990). Apego e perda: apego. In *Apego e perda: apego*. Martins Fontes.
- Franco, M. H. P., & Mazorra, L. (2007). Criança e luto: Vivências fantasmáticas diante da morte do genitor. *Estudos de Psicologia*, 24(4), 503–511.
- Green, A. (2018). Play and reflection in Donald Winnicott's writings. In *Play and Reflection in Donald Winnicott's Writings* (pp. 7-26). Routledge.
- Hillis, S., Unwin, J., Cluver, L., Sherr, L., Goldman, P., Rawlings, L., Bachman, G., Villaveces, A., Nelson, C., & Green, P. (2021). *Children: The hidden pandemic 2021: a joint report of COVID-19-associated orphanhood and a strategy for action*.
- Mello, A. R., & Baseggio, D. B. (2013). *Infância e morte: Um estudo acerca da percepção das crianças sobre o fim da vida*.
- Nakajima, S., Masaya, I., Akemi, S., & Takako, K. (2022). Complicated grief in those bereaved by violent death: The effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on complicated grief. *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience*.
- Paiva, L. E., & Kovács, M. J. (2008). *A arte de falar da morte: A literatura infantil como recurso para abordar a morte com crianças e educadores*.
- Penariol, M. P., & Flores, D. M. M. S. (2021). A pandemia e a necessidade de falar sobre morte com as crianças. *Revista de Psicologia da Unesp*, 20(1), 32–48.
- Rodrigues, J. V. de O. (2022). *Órfãos em decorrência da covid-19 no Brasil: Sobre a vivência de crianças e adolescentes em meio às perdas, uma realidade sem números*.
- Trinca, W. (2020). *Formas lúdicas de investigação em psicologia: Procedimento de Desenhos-Estórias e Procedimento de Desenhos de Família com Estórias*. Vetor Editora.
- Winnicott, D. W. (2015). *Deprivation and delinquency*. Routledge.
- Winnicott, D. W. (2018a). *Thinking about children*. Routledge.
- Winnicott, D. W. (2018b). *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development*. Routledge.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1987). *Babies and their mothers*. Da Capo Press, Incorporated.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1991). *Playing and reality*. Psychology Press.