Journeys of Grief: Redundancy Explored as a Source of Workplace Grief

By

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Abstract

Organizations often don’t recognise the grief of workers, especially the grief that may accompany the experience of being made redundant. An exploratory phenomenological study conducted in Australia involved in-depth interviews with ten middle- and senior-level executives. Respondents were interviewed, several more than once, about their experiences of being made redundant. All had been made redundant on more than one occasion. Their Journey of Grief that resulted from their redundancy is shared to offer a new understanding of grief at work. I argue that the grief surrounding redundancy commences before news of redundancy is confirmed, with the journey involving several stages: Something changed; Loss commenced; Loss confirmed; and, Afterwards. New understanding of the significance of the grief experience in organisations will assist organisations and workers to better understand and respond to their experiences.

Redundancy as a Journey of Grief

This is an exploration of the personal experience of being made redundant from one's place of work which I consider to be a largely unacknowledged source of grief in organisational life. I define redundancy here as referring to positions (and, thus, people) that are no longer required by the organization. For the respondents in this study, the redundancies were without choice, and with or without significant financial incentives. I will argue that being made redundant without choice, regardless of whether financial gain is associated, is likely to be a significant source of grief for those concerned.

Redundancies, often through downsizing, are the intentional or planned elimination of positions or jobs (Cascio, 1993; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997; Palmer, Kabanoff and Dunford, 1997; Clarke, 1999). Each year, millions of workers are made redundant, and find themselves without a job. It is considered by many to be one of the inevitable outcomes of living in a global world where continual adjustments are needed by workplaces to remain competitive (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997). Redundancies are now considered a normal part of organisational life (Vickers, 2001b; Parris and Vickers, 2009; Orlando, 1999).

Redundancies can result from downsizing, restructuring, lowering of overheads, the simplifying of bureaucracy, the desire to speed decision making, and moves intended to improve communication, enhance entrepreneurship and increase productivity. Redundant workers are reportedly: downsized; separated; severed; unassigned; proactively outplaced; slashed; cut; eliminated; excessed; rightsized; surplused; severed; trimmed; re-engineered; pared down; terminated; chopped; given early retirement; and, put out to pasture (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996; Laabs, 1999). I present stories here of the grief reaction of targets of redundancy, as well as exploring their experience of redundancy as a phased journey of grief that, I believe, commences prior to the confirmation of that redundancy.
Grief and Work

Unfortunately, grief is a painful and common experience (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001). However, the idea that grief exists in and around our workplaces is rarely considered. Members of workplaces are expected to leave their emotions at the door, even if they are grieving (Vickers, 2005). This lack of understanding of grief, the grieving process, and flawed assumptions that exist about grief (Eysetsemitan, 1998), especially as it manifests at workplaces, contributes to the lack of acknowledgement of grief, making the experience of grief even more painful (Vickers, 2005). Estimates suggest that grief can cost organisations billions of dollars every year (Myers, 1984; McClelland, 1985; Eysetsemitan, 1998) and yet organisations still remain unconcerned about grief, especially as it impacts workers and workplaces. This lack of acknowledgement of workplace-related grief can bind or limit our understanding of grief (Vickers, 2005).

Traditional notions of grief usually associate grief with death and the loss associated with death. Most of us would identify grief as deep or intense sorrow or distress, something that causes keen distress or suffering (Wilkes, 1979, p. 643). However, even with traditional notions of grief, it is still the case that one is usually only “allowed” to grieve, especially at work, when someone close to you has died. Personnel policies codify society's grief rules (Eysetsemitan, 1998) and, while these policies may vary, the grieving period is still formally (and narrowly) determined. Even for recognized grief events, the few days leave allocated to "recover" from the death of a spouse or child will not be sufficient to enable grief to be experienced over its full course (Vickers, 2005).

Models of grieving foster the assumption that grief is mostly associated with death, with grieving individuals encouraged to simply accept the loss, work through the pain, adjust to a new world where the deceased is missing, and move on with their life (Eysetsemitan, 1998; Worden, 1991; Vickers, 2005; 2006a; George et al, 2006). The literature on grief includes discussions around the various tasks of grieving (Worden, 1991; Eysetsemitan, 1998; Noppe, 2000); grieving work (Stroebe and Stroebe, 1991); phases of grieving to be endured (Kubler-Ross, 1969); and whether grief is experienced universally or tempered by a myriad of individual differences such as culture, gender, developmental level or personality (Noppe, 2000).

However, models such as these often fail to consider chronic or ongoing grief, grief that re-emerges and re-asserts itself over time, or grief that might be multiple-sourced (Vickers, 2005; 2006a; 2006b; George et al, 2006). There are also many different characterisations of grief and mourning: normal and abnormal grief; unresolved or chronic grief; complicated grief; inhibited grief; delayed grief; pathological grief; absent grief; denied grief; bounded grief; a prolonged absence of grief; exaggerated grief; masked grief; chronic mourning; distorted mourning and inhibited mourning (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001; Noppe, 2000; Vickers, 2005; 2006a; 2006b; George et al, 2006). However, few have connected grief with our workplaces, and none previously have offered a model of grief to enhance understanding of the journey of grief and its role in the experience of redundancy.

Grief experiences that have been recognised elsewhere as spilling into the workday have included: the onset or exacerbation of a significant chronic illness (Vickers,
2001a; 2006b); the impending death of a loved one (Krohn, 1998); grief in public administration (Vickers, 2006a); or, grief associated with the emotions of grief, joy, hope and fear for mothers of children with significant developmental disabilities or significant chronic illness (Larson, 1998; Vickers, 2005; 2006b). Sources of grief have also been identified as emanating directly from the workplace, including: Toxic workplaces and toxic emotions at work (Frost, 2003); emotionally anorexic workplaces (Fineman, 1993); bullying, violence and incivility at work (Rees, 1995; Mann, 1996; Randall, 1997; Vickers, 2002; 2006c; 2007; Barron, 2002); alienating workplaces (Blauner, 1964; Fromm, 1963/1994; Braverman, 1994; La Bier, 1986); and abusive workplaces (Powell, 1998; Perrone and Vickers, 2004; Vickers, 2004). There has also been some recognition of the grief associated with redundancies and downsizing (Stein, 1998; 2001; Parris and Vickers, 2009; Vickers, 2001b; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997), including the grief experienced by those doing the downsizing, as well as those who survive the process.

In this paper, I explore the grief of those who are made redundant from their place of work. The next section describes the methodological decisions made when undertaking this study, before presenting the Journeys of Grief experienced by ten senior executives made redundant from their places of work.

An Exploratory Phenomenological Study

Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology concerned with the richness of individual experience, of exploring everyday experiences and the subjective perspective of the respondent. Phenomenological studies value this lived experience (Oiler, 1982), especially the meaning it holds for the individual (Drew, 1989). The value comes from learning about lived experience from the informant's perspective - to capture experience as it has been lived and share it with others (Vickers, 2001a). The respondents' "reality" is deliberately subjective and perspectival; the "truth" that flows has only one legitimate source of data -- those who have lived the phenomenon being investigated (Baker, Wuest and Stern, 1992, p. 1357). By exploring the responses of employees who had been made redundant -- many of them several times -- I uncovered subjective, earthy and rich responses that illustrated journeys of grief.

Ten respondents (nine male and one female) were interviewed at least once, sometimes twice, and on a couple of occasions, the interview data was supplemented with additional email correspondence initiated by respondents who continued to ruminate over their experiences after the interview process had ceased. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis undertaken. Several themes and sub-themes emerged globally (reported elsewhere), with the theme of grief interpreted here.

Studies of downsizing have been mostly positivist studies that do not adequately explore and capture the personal experience and meaning of the grief associated with being made redundant. Concern has been given elsewhere to the language of downsizing and what that might mean, as well as shifts in the focus and reasoning of downsizing processes and the consequences of downsizing (Palmer, Kabanoff and Dunford, 1997). Others have also focused, for example, on the painful experience of the "downsizer" or "executioner" (Wright and Barling, 1998; Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997), the "survivor" (Brockner et al, 1987; Horsted and Doherty, 1994; Kets
de Vries and Balazs, 1997), and the "victim" (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997; Clarke, 1999; Vickers, 2002). However, even Wright and Barling's (1998) grounded theory exploration tended to discuss the problems experienced by downsizers from an employer perspective.

Most of the studies about people who have been made redundant have also tended to focus on employer concerns. For example, there have been those that extol the costs and benefits of downsizing (for example, Cascio, 1993; Mathews and Duran, 1999; Pollock et al, 1999); those who have considered performance of those that are left behind, the survivors (for example, Cascio, 1993; Gottlieb and Conkling, 1995; Braun, 1997; Layden and Harrington, 1998; Wright and Barling, 1998), as well as those who have considered the likelihood that some downsizing approaches may be more effective than others (Mathews and Duran, 1999).

The model of grief presented here reveals a staged Journey of Grief that commenced prior to respondents being informed of their redundancy. I note that other well known models of grief show phases of grief, and recognise that the experiences of individuals are inclined to shift around between the nominated phases, rather than always following a chronological pattern (Eg Kubler-Ross, 1969). However, because the grief shared here was largely determined by the actions and process of the organisations where respondents worked, the phased nature of the Journeys of Grief depicted here were, I believe, largely chronological as presented. While it is acknowledged that all respondents might not have moved through grief in a linear staged process all the time, and that some respondents might not have found all the phases of their journey especially unpleasant, the respondents did report their experience of grief as being a phased sequence. This interpretation offers an alternative view of current understandings of grief, especially as they are considered within the context of the workplace.

The Journeys of Grief consisted of four phases:

* Something Changed
* Loss Commenced
* Loss Confirmed
* Afterwards.

I have described the model in the past tense, reflecting the way in which respondents described their experiences to me. I believe the process of reflection, remembering and the implications of hindsight is an important part of their story. All respondents reported having been made redundant on more than one occasion.

**Journeys of Grief**

Even with traditional models of grief, the tendency is still to underestimate the effects of loss, and to underestimate how intensely distressing and disabling loss is, and how long the distress may last (Bowlby, 1980; Eyetsemitan, 1998; Vickers, 2005; 2006a). This is especially likely if grief is related to working and employment. For people who have been made redundant, especially those with no choice in this, their grief experience is likely to be marked and potentially long term. Unfortunately, there is a
tendency to suppose that a normal healthy person can and should get over loss fairly rapidly, and completely, and return to their lives as they were before.

It is noted that grief is experienced differently, by different people (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001) and may be influenced by a variety of factors, such as gender, cultural context, and the age of survivors (Noppe, 2000). There may also be marked individual differences in the intensity and duration of grief. Some grieve openly and deeply for a year, only slowly returning to a semblance of normal functioning. Others suffer intensely, but for a shorter period. There also remains little agreement about what might constitute normal grief, when it might be considered abnormal, nor its routine manifestations (Noppe, 2000). Flawed assumptions and faulty knowledge about grief combine poorly with expectations about workplace behaviour, to the detriment of the grieving individual. The result can be "stifled grief"- grief denied its full course of mourning (Eysetemitan, 1998), or bounded grief, grief not enabled; grief not freely lived, recognised, acknowledged or understood (Vickers, 2005). I acknowledge all of these permutations of grief and differences in its experience. Nevertheless, I was struck by a pattern that emerged from the data showing a phased, passage into grief that surrounded respondents’ redundancy experience.

**Something Changed**

It was frequently reported by respondents that the organization where they had worked had, prior to their redundancy, experienced a particularly buoyant and optimistic period, characterized by growth, energy and high income. Adrian spoke of record sales, an expanding company, and high morale. He described the morale in his workplace as "fantastic" and of being drawn to his workplace because of the values it espoused. Similarly, Lewis reported extraordinary growth and working in a great team. He also demonstrated his extreme commitment to his workplace, of working extremely long hours, undertaking lots of travel, and of his excitement and sense of thrill at being involved with what he termed "a hell of a ride". Warren described his organisation as a 'very progressive company, very compassionate company … almost family working together'; Anthony echoed these sentiments: 'I felt it was like a family atmosphere’. Alice reported her work to be challenging and rewarding.

Then, all respondents reported that something changed. I argue that this was the beginning of their Journey of Grief. Kubler-Ross identified the classic stages of grief individuals go through who are dying which include: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, noting that people may jump between stages, as their grief unfolds (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Similarly, others have confirmed redundancy as having cyclical grief reactions including anger, denial, depression and readjustment (Brammer and Humberger, 1984; Cartwright and Cooper, 1994; Horsted and Doherty, 1994). However, all of these are based on grief commencing after concrete knowledge of the loss or impending loss. While it is acknowledged that this model may overlap with earlier thinking (eg the potential for denial, anger, readjustment and depression), the Journeys of Grief model reported here shows grief starting prior to certain knowledge of the redundancy. I argue that there is a period prior to concrete knowledge, when one’s inner voice or intuition informs the person affected that something has changed, that something is not right. All respondents indicated this as they looked back and reflected on their experiences.
For example, Jake spoke of a change in the management where he worked; a new boss, who invited him to craft his new job description:

**Jake:** So it was last May, there was a change in my boss, who was the Executive Director of the group, reporting through to the CEO. And she came to me one day, on a one-on-one catch-up, and said, ‘What do you think needs to be done to progress things and get change happening and get some things resolved?’ And I said, ‘Well, here’s six things that I think of right now.’ And she said, ‘Do you want to do that full-time?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I’d love to.’ … So I’d basically crafted my own position description in this new job, and my boss said, ‘Do you want to do it full-time?’

Others also spoke of significant changes in their workplace that marked the beginning of their Journeys of Grief including: a new General Manager (Alice, Lewis); a restructure (Alice, Warren, Adrian, Lewis); needing to reapply for their job (Jake; Alice); a merger (Jake, Anthony); a change in the values of atmosphere (Anthony, Adrian); or, a downturn (Ben, Adrian, Lewis, Anthony). Respondents specifically described their workplaces before this initial change, and after. Ben specifically said that "it changed a lot for me" as he approached his third redundancy.

For respondents, this start of a Journey of Grief would have included mild or acute anxiety, uncertainty, even excitement as a result of the “differentness” at their place of work. Most described this as the beginning of a downward spiral that included: lower morale, reduced enthusiasm, a shift in expectations at work and about work, and reduced energy. Lewis used the metaphor of "things coming off the boil", of cooling off, of becoming less driven and less frenetic:

**Lewis:** Yes, we'd been going on a hell of a ride. Paul left. The new MD was winding down. So, 2000, a lot of things basically a lot of things came off the boil. There were the tax changes. GST affected the bottom line quite significantly. There were, companies like ours got hit quite badly in terms of having to absorb costs.

**Loss Commenced**

Then, loss commenced in earnest as the organisational changes became more negative and more apparent. The next phase of Journeys of Grief was defined by observable, known loss began. This still may occur prior to the point at which people have been made redundant or know for sure this is what will happen to them. In the stories reported here, while respondents had not actually yet been made redundant, their work life had begun to dramatically change. Stories of reduction of duties, new positions being drawn up, applications for new positions all represented, for them, a loss of what they had been enjoying previously.

For many respondents -- especially with the benefit of hindsight -- there were many indicators that their employment was under threat and that job loss was imminent. For example, Adrian went on sick leave to have open heart surgery and while he was away, half of his responsibilities were re-assigned to another manager. Similarly, Lewis was told that he would have to find work in another division, and that his responsibilities had been passed to another:
Lewis: Now Ross came in and wanted things done very differently. He wanted specific product marketing material, even though the market had changed dramatically over the last 5 years and what I were doing was very successful. He decided that I couldn't do that. He wanted somebody else to do that. So, he brought some of his people in and gave product marketing to those people. He also decided that the technical people wouldn't be under me any more. They would be with somebody else.

Ben was demoted:

Ben: So I actually got demoted. I kept my salary, I kept my grade, et cetera, but I was no longer the national marketing manager. They bought a guy in; a guy who in particular a couple of us really did not get along with. My job went from where I really enjoyed it to I hated it. I had been looking for work prior to my retrenchment.

Alice recalled being interviewed for her new position over the phone while breastfeeding her new baby while on maternity leave:

Alice: So all through that -, I went for the job and didn’t get it, and I still had about, say, 10 months left of maternity leave. So they basically just put me on the backburner, and put me on hold. They wouldn’t finalise anything until my maternity leave was up.

For many, these changes were recalled with anger – a classic grief response. Respondents spoke directly and angrily about the person responsible, and about the denial by employers of their increasingly disenfranchised and marginalised status. Adrian rang the manager who had taken over his responsibilities:

Adrian: And I said, "What about me, Bob? Are you going to give me the DCM?" He said, "The what?" I said, "The Don't Come Monday, OK?" "Oh, no, no, no. That's not, no, that's not on our plans." I said, "You're sure?". He said, "Yes." I said "OK" So, I just left it at that.

Lewis also asserted his frustrations to the Manager responsible:

Lewis: I said to him when he did it, yes, I said to him at the time, 'You've disenfranchised me." "Oh no. You've still got responsibilities." And I said, "No. Let's be honest. In your organization, I'm the loser." "Well, yes, I suppose so." And he wouldn't be direct. But I threw it at him. "Oh, well, you'll be going to this and you've still got that to do and you've still got an important role". And I said "Oh, yes, right." So, I mean, the writing was on the wall.

The emphatic and frequent denials from the employing organisation were also a routine feature of this phase of the Journeys of Grief. Anthony was told that he would be a part of the new management team after the organisational restructure, which turned out not to be the case:

Anthony: … Two days before I was made redundant she was talking about my key role in the new management team … And as I was discussing things with
them [senior management], saying ‘This is how the structure of the business might look moving forward’, the platitudes were ‘I know what you’ve done. You’ll be a key person.’ And about a day before … I got called up to say … , “Well, it looks like the role you’ve applied for, you may not get. So, is there anything else you’re interested in?’ … So I had a problem with process. But she said, ‘Well, if you’re not going to look at some alternatives, then you may not have anything to come back to on Monday.’ So I said, ‘What are you telling me? That if I don’t choose one of these roles, I haven’t got anything moving forward? This is different from what you said to me about three days ago.’

These early signs of grief, manifesting here as anger and confusion, are noted elsewhere as symptoms of grief which may include denial, inappropriate behaviour, distress and hostility (Jacob, 1993).

Loss Confirmed
At this third stage of their Journeys of Grief, respondents learned for certain of their being made redundant. What were reported were strong reactions of anger, frustration, high levels of emotion, weeping, humiliation, feelings of rejection, and anxiety. Adrian’s loss was confirmed when he learned that the executive at his organisation had conducted a "Corporate Review" which, coincidentally, followed him having open heart surgery and six weeks sick leave. While Adrian reported not knowing what was coming, his earlier comments challenging the manager who had taken over much of his responsibility signal that his grief had already commenced at this point and that he did suspect, prior to being shown the door:

Adrian:  He gets up, shuts the door ... So, "Adrian, there's been a corporate restructure and [pause] they've decided-" "Whose decided?" "The executive's decided … that your position's redundant." [pause] … So, that's what happened [Emotion clearly heard in Adrian's voice now]…
MV:  How did you feel walking out of his office?
Adrian:  Oh, it was bloody terrible! Because what I had to do after that, it was everyone wanted to see me! This was my first day. Everyone wanted to see me. So I had to go and do the rounds! And then the phone was ringing, my staff were ringing the phones … Because my staff are just lovely people and they want to know. They want to know from me what's happening. So I'm going to tell them, "There's been a corporate restructure and I'm redundant." … I wasn't really concerned about the redundancy … I thought, you know, "What a lot of crap… This is bloody disgusting. I've just had this heart operation, you know. How could they treat me like this? I've really been dedicated to them” … But, it just wasn't-, you know, they wanted me to go.

Adrian’s response demonstrates his grief manifesting in anger, a normal and well documented response to grief. However, Adrian is also demonstrating complicated grief resulting from a life changing event that can result in major depression, generalized anxiety; even posttraumatic stress disorder (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001). Adrian was very discomforted by his feelings of betrayal at his workplace which professes valuing staff above anything else – an espoused value that was not confirmed by their actions. Ben also demonstrated grief-related anger in a verbal attack on the person delivering news of his redundancy. Of note, Ben elected to tape his meeting, confirming his feelings of mistrust:
Ben: So they allowed me to tape it. As I say, the relationship between my boss and myself there was pretty intense, and I think it ends up with something like him saying, ‘Well Ben, this is very unfortunate. I do wish you all the very best in your future and I hope everything will work out,’ something to that effect. And I responded with, ‘Look Chris, let’s not mess around. You hate my guts, and I can assure you I hate yours.’ That is how the tape finishes from memory, something like that.

Similarly, Anthony also reported anger at the indignity of how he was treated.

Anthony: Well, I suppose the indignity of it all was that all of a sudden – and I know this may not sound very nice – but the indignity from my perspective was that there were all these junior people that were just shovelling me from office to office, trying to give me due respect, but trying to be official about it … So they took me through there, but it was in the executive dining room. And I thought, ‘What a place to do this!’

Anthony’s anger was mixed with his sense of humiliation, of being demeaned, and treated inappropriately and insensitively. Lewis also described his similarly mixed emotions that vivify his grief response which included anger in response to the disrespect he experienced:

Lewis: I went in and the Director went through the usual rubbish about, you know, the reorganization, “I need to change things” …. And this is your pay out and you sign it here and now. It's more than I should give you. Sign it now otherwise I won't give you that amount. So I sat and read every word of about a 5 page contract and took about 10-15 minutes over it … They were most upset by that. I then got told, "OK, you've got half an hour to go and clear your desk." So I had to go down, grab some things quickly and there was some security guards waiting. And then I got marched out of the building. And I thought that was so demeaning … I was annoyed. [Yes.] And the thing that I did find humiliating, I had to ring up and ask permission to come back and collect all my stuff.

Ben also commented on the indignity and lack of respect involved with the process he experienced, of having to check in with security, and of the difficulty of having to tell other people in the office about what had happened. For many respondents, the lack of respect accorded them during the process was a feature of their grief as they mourned the loss of respect from colleagues that they had enjoyed prior to their redundancy and its likely impact on their self-esteem:

Ben: … I had to report in to security … I had to check first, that’s right. So I phoned in the morning and was told that, once I was coming, could I let security know when I came in. I got in there, and you felt like a thief. You know, you felt as if you’d done something fraudulent. And the guy didn’t even know anything about it. Which was even more frustrating, I suppose. So I went up to my floor, and started getting my things. And obviously the area that I worked in, this was a hell of a shock for them as well. And in that few hours
they had actually had a whip-round for me and bought me a little going-away present. Well, I just choked, and I actually cried in my office. It just got to me.

For Lewis, Sunil and Ben, their experience of grief was exacerbated by the way the organisation handled their respective departures. From being senior, respected, successful staff members, they found themselves humiliated and demeaned, having to ask permission to return to their workplace, or finding themselves marched out of the building. Ben felt he had been pressured into accepting a payout, without having any opportunity to assess it properly, or think it through when he was so affected by his grief. The literature confirms that grief reactions frequently include: mental lapses, difficulty in making decisions, anxiety, helplessness, an inability to concentrate, preoccupation, social withdrawal and weeping (Eyseteman, 1998). Also noted have been: cognitive disorganization; confusion and preoccupation (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001). Alice, Ben and Jake reported shock, anxiety, confusion and numbness at the news of their redundancies, all classic grief responses:

**Alice:** I don’t think I actually said a whole lot. I think I was in shock. I really can’t remember. I can remember sitting in the office and who was in there, and I just kept saying, ‘Well, why?’ And they just kept giving me probably the straight line, ‘Well, as you know, we’re restructuring.’ … And I was really upset. [slight pause] That’s right, I said, ‘OK, look, I have quite a bit to do to follow up from the conference. There’s heaps of things to do … I’ll need probably two weeks to finalise everything.’ … And they said, ‘No, you have to leave today.’ And I said, ‘I can’t do that. I’ve got so much work stacked up’ … And they said ‘No’.

Jake’s confusion and shock were evident in his reported inability to speak with the outplacement service or process what had happened. Jake also reported going into shock, and weeping as a result of his loss:

**Jake:** I had no idea that was going to happen. I immediately went into shock … I actually nearly broke down in tears, effectively, because I’d -, I was that motivated to the new job … I didn’t really say a lot at the time. I was just really numb with disbelief basically, and nodding. And I just didn’t really have the thought process to go through and work out, ‘Why are you doing this?’ … So when I went to the outplacement guy. He saw I was in shock and tried to keep me talking. But in the end I just had to say to him, ‘Look, I’ve got to go.’ … So I went in, locked away the laptop, grabbed my bag and a cabcharge, and went home. I’d only just spoken to my wife five seconds before I was called into my boss’ office. And that was like an hour and a half later, I’m walking through the door. I’d said I’d call her back, so she was worried. And yes, I just broke down in tears and told her I’d been retrenched … I didn’t go into work the next day. Went back into work on Monday, and was very bitter and upset, disappointed.

Tension exists between grief reactions and work. Expressions of the urge to weep or appeals to others for help inevitably carry with them an admission of weakness (Bowlby, 1980), making it even more difficult for those impacted to show their grief. Grieving behaviours such as those listed above are generally deemed to be inappropriate workplace behaviour (Eyseteman, 1998). Cartwright and Cooper
(1994: 149) describe 'the extreme misery and sense of rejection that many people experience following job loss, and the importance and meaning which work gives to an individual's life'. Adrian depicts this misery and acute grief response when calling his staff together to tell them what had happened:

Adrian: Oh, bloody, well, I was … getting pretty emotional. So [emotion rising in Adrian's voice as he recounts this]. So, yes ... And I was just mess when the group came around. I was just a mess … I said [to his staff], "The whole thing is, they didn't want me to start [not to come back after the heart surgery]. They wanted me to just go, and I had, I had to tell you myself." So, I was just –, and I just broke down. And I was kind of sobbing and, and trying to explain to the people.

Alice also reported being visibly upset and weeping in front of colleagues when she finally knew what had happened. She also notes a potential feeling of betrayal that would have exacerbated her grief response, commenting that senior staff she had believed had been close to her had not helped her:

Alice: I actually did the rounds and said goodbye to a few key people. And the thing that was really upsetting was that I went into senior people such as the chief executive officer; I went into his office, and he just came out and saw me talking to his secretary and said, ‘What is wrong?’ Because he saw my face. And I said, ‘I’ve just been retrenched.’ And he was just like [imitating shocked expression]. Because he didn’t know, because it was his second-in-command who handled operational issues. None of those things passed his desk. So he basically said, ‘I’m really sorry.’ … but, you know, ‘See you later. There’s nothing I can do.’

Larrabee, Weine and Woolcott (2003: 353) discuss the "wordless nothing" of grief and trauma. For many grieving people, the central question surrounding their experience concerns the very possibility of actually narrating them. Articulating the feelings of betrayal, loss and confusion that respondents felt was difficult for them. What they have lived was extremely distressing and emotionally disturbing; a complete disruption to normal everyday experience. The assumptions and expectations of what have previously been usual, reliable, humdrum activities of their workplaces had been destroyed. They were left with the difficulty of telling their trauma – especially when they may not have understood it as grief themselves -- and of sharing their grief in a way that another might understand, acknowledge and make sense of, and in a way that encapsulated their loss adequately and accurately.

Having a job is more than just a source of income for most people. Work serves a variety of functions including the: imposition of structure on the day; providing opportunities to use current skills and develop new ones; enabling social contact; providing activity and variety; enacting individual goals and purpose; and, defining aspects of one's personal status and identity (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994). Losing one’s job is a significant loss.

Afterwards
An important part of their Journey of Grief was what happened to respondents after they left their places of work. Indeed, the literature offers little about the experiences
of those that fade away. The period I have termed “Afterwards” can be as long as it takes for that person. I would also suggest that it would not automatically end with the securing of a new position, even a better position, and that the uncertainty, the anger and the distrust would have remained with respondents long after their experience of redundancy was completed.

Chronic grief has been defined as prolonged and extended grief, with symptoms being extremely pronounced and the reaction is prolonged and unresolved. The general impression is one of deep and pressing sorrow (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001; George et al, 2006). Redundancy could prove a likely source of chronic grief for workers, especially if they had difficulties securing similar re-employment quickly and if they had been through the process on a number of occasions. For the respondents here, not only were they likely to have experienced chronic grief, it was highly likely that this grief was not recognised by themselves or anyone else around them making it even more difficult to bear.

For instance, after Adrian’s redundancy, he returned to hospital with serious angina, and fears for his life. The health impacts of the stress associated with his loss had a direct impact on his health that would have offered other sources of grief for him to deal with in the future. Sunil also reported health problems as a result of his experiences and while being able to find work again at a higher paying level, he still acknowledged that his health had suffered:

Sunil: My health suffered by doing the job and carrying on doing my job [knowing that redundancy was coming] … the stress of that meant I wasn’t getting any sleep, and I had gout, which is a metabolic disorder that doesn’t have any particular cause, it’s just caused by stress, overwork, etc. That was interfering with my work; I was hobbling around for three or four months. So again, your body telling you something … So I’ve learnt that I won’t be doing that in my new job if I can help it. So yes, my health did suffer.

Negative health effects have been attributed to grief (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001). Unlike many of the other respondents, Sunil did not have difficulties regaining work at the same or a higher level, a situation which he himself attributed to him having less negative feelings and depression about the outcomes of his redundancy. When asked about his feelings on the redundancy, he had this to say to colleagues:

Sunil: … And I just said, ‘Well, think of my circumstances. I want to move to Australia; I’m working in a territory … where there’s an oversupply of reps.’ So you can understand why they did what they did. So, I didn’t feel anger; I just rationalised it all through, and I was quite happy with the decision anyway. And, as I said, two weeks later I got a job with double the salary. So it wasn’t difficult for me to deal with … it didn’t affect my financial status or my self-esteem like I think it may affect others.

Sunil also reported receiving a generous payout which allowed him to plan for a two year period of not working, enabling him to consider carefully his working future. However, the literature confirms that some grieving individuals appear to get over their losses almost immediately and to move on with sufficient ease as to raise doubts in others about the possibility that they may be hiding something or running away
from their pain (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001). While one cannot predict with certainty Sunil’s motives here, while he did report job offers coming quite quickly after his redundancy, his plan for a lengthy time away from the workplace is indicative of a sense of disrupted future and of the need to take time to process and reflect upon what had happened – a likely grief reaction. The literature confirms that grief can manifest in a number of responses that Sunil might have been experiencing: a disturbance of identity; a disrupted sense of future; a long-term search for meaning; disrupted social functioning; isolation; and role disruptions (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001).

Others reported more specific negative outcomes with financial concerns being significant for many respondents, even those with handsome payouts. Anthony reported his financial concerns with his financial resources being diminished over time while he was out of work:

**Anthony:** … And there were the negative -, all the catastrophes happening in the global equity markets. So what I had accrued was going backwards. The redundancy amount, it doesn’t matter what investment you were putting it in. These were other stresses. You were going backwards unless you did a very conservative investment strategy … I didn’t have lack of sleep. I just felt [slight pause], to a degree, it was worrying about what I would do for the future. Can I stop working full-time now with what I’ve been given and not really get serious about my career again?

**MV:** And could you have?

**Anthony:** No. No. People say -, I don’t mind telling you the amount … I think in my hand it was about seven or eight hundred thousand dollars. But by the time I’d done a lot of things, I think I’ve got about sixty thousand left.

Simon reported having to take work in another city after months of unemployment. Lewis reported the subsequent breakdown of his marriage after months of unemployment, and the serious illness of his daughter. For Lewis, the time after redundancy was likely to have been a period of chronic grief. Having been transferred to Australia, he rang his boss back in the UK to try and get a transfer back. The news wasn’t good:

**Lewis:** I rang up my boss in the UK who said "Your timing is not good. The takeover was a can of worms. It's been a disaster. I are sacking 400 people next week."

**MV:** So there was no where for you to go?

**Lewis:** "So there's no job." So I got made redundant on two continents. So I spent six months trying to get a job …

**MV:** … You're wife was unhappy?

**Lewis:** Oh, she was very unhappy. Didn't know what, what, what I would do. I then found that I didn't have a job in the UK, so I spent six months trying to get a role … Now, [former employer] had sponsored me for temporary residency … They pulled that, so I had no residency status. I had no Medicare. Meanwhile my daughter was diagnosed with a cataract on her eye. She had congenital cataracts. She had to have various operations. My wife had various operations. So I had huge medical bills. I were almost deported … I
were arriving into England with a house which I couldn't get tenants out of. With no job. And no money. So, it got pretty strenuous and stressful.

Lewis reported being very unhappy when he was out of work, feeling emasculated by the fact that he couldn’t support his wife and family. Studies have confirmed that the loss experienced when one loses one's job can often extend well beyond the loss of income, as Lewis describes, and might include: increased dependency on other people (financially and physically); problems of lost identity; problems of demotivation and boredom; problems of uncertainty; problematic impacts on self-esteem; the experience of fear of lost and deteriorating skills over time; lost confidence; and feeling apologetic about not working, especially for those with a very strong Protestant work ethic (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994), such as Lewis demonstrated.

The anxiety of unemployment can also lead to psychological symptoms associated with depression and may even express itself via crime, domestic violence, child abuse and alcohol and drug abuse (Orlando, 1999). While I did not hear these problems reported in this study, there is no question that being without work can be more stressful than having a stressful job. The personal disaster that accompanies many people's experience of loss and tragedy (Raphael, 1986; Vickers, 2001) can creep past one's best defences, because it is an uncontrollable, largely unanticipated and personal loss:

One that gathers force slowly and insidiously, creeping around one's defences rather than smashing through them. People are unable to mobilize their normal defences against the threat, sometimes because they have elected, consciously or unconsciously to ignore it, sometimes because they have been misinformed about it, and sometimes because they cannot do anything to avoid it in any case (Erikson, 1994: 21).

Redundancy as a Journey of Grief

The purpose of this paper was to document the Journeys of Grief experienced by people who had been made redundant from their workplaces. I felt it was important that scholars of organisational life contemplate more carefully the "damage" being inflicted on workers as they journey towards and beyond their experience of redundancy. As with all grief experiences, people affected may also be permanently damaged, traumatised and alienated by their experiences – they may never be the same. I also recognise that not all respondents (eg Sunil) appeared to be experiencing grief at all. However, I would suggest that this finding confirms what we already know about grief: that grief is experienced differently by different people, enacted differently by different people, and can be influenced by a myriad of factors including re-employment capacity, age, gender, financial status and cultural background that could not all be determined with any certainty here and that deserve further investigation. Given Sunil’s plans for a long stay away from the workplace, I would suggest that, for Sunil, grief was still present, but perhaps in a different form.

Organisations need to be concerned about grief at work so as to be able to respond appropriately. The grieving rules that exist in our communities and organisations tend to specify very narrowly who, when, where, how, for how long, and for which people, we are allowed to grieve (Eyetsemitan, 1998). In the workplace especially,
exemptions from normal responsibilities that normally associate with grief, as well as the receipt of social and emotional support, follow normalized rules that associate with traditional assumptions surrounding grieving. However, you cannot "ask people to check their emotions at the door" (Dutton et al, 2002: 61) especially those people who may be experiencing the grief of redundancy. Sadly, in organizations, this is often what is expected.

Studies of traditional bereavements for workers have shown grieving workers suggesting that employers might offer the following: (a) more time off work and showing support (37%); (b) counselling or professional help (29%); and (c) concern and understanding (27%) (Eyetsemitan, 1998, p. 475). Such simple measures might prove useful to support grief in our workplaces. Acknowledgement and facilitation of grief are key requirements for organisations needing to respond to grief, especially for workers who are being made redundant.

When claims are being made that work is becoming even more central to our lives and identities (Trinca and Fox, 2004), support for individual workers is crucial. Recognizing the grief that is associated with redundancy is an important step forward and recognising the phased nature of their Journey of Grief, and the early point of its commencement, enables us to better understand and respond to it.

References


