

Men and Miscarriage: An Insider's Story from the Outside

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Abstract: This narrative is a story of the author's experience of miscarriage from a father's perspective combined with his role as an insider researcher qualitatively studying men's experiences of miscarriage. The author explores the dimensions of being an insider and outsider in the role of a father of miscarried children as well as in the role of a researcher. This is also a story of discovering how disenfranchised death separates us and has the potential to connect us. Lastly, this is a revelation about the unexpected disconnection that stems from being an insider researcher.

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We frequently think of loss as a disconnection, and yet I find that death often brings people together. Mourners join in support of memories shared as well as in grief for opportunities that will never come. In this way, loss both separates us and brings us together. My wife and I experienced two miscarriages some years ago, and so few people asked about how the loss was for me that I began to wonder about the uniqueness of my experience. Despite a broad societal presumption that men do not want to talk about their emotions, I certainly wanted the opportunity. So, too, did nearly all the men I invited to participate in my grounded theory research on men's experiences of miscarriage, many of whom had never been asked to tell their story.

A Ceremony for Two

My wife and I had nearly made it to the three-month mark when she and I learned that our first pregnancy had miscarried. She had started spotting on a Friday. While we knew this didn't necessarily indicate a problem, we were nonetheless scared. It was possible that the bleeding was from the placenta imbedding to the uterine wall. However, the bleeding persisted over the weekend, and on Monday afternoon we scheduled an ultrasound.

Having feared the possibility of a miscarriage for twelve weeks, I had thought about this moment many times. Yet, I hadn't known how to approach the event when it arrived. I dressed up in a three-piece suit, the one I reserved for special occasions. After all, whether alive or not, I was preparing to see our baby for the first time. There wasn't anything I could do to change this situation, but I felt that showing my respect in this physical way was something.

To learn that your child is neither alive nor dead inside the womb, but has instead passed on unnoticed some weeks ago, is information for which it is quite impossible to prepare. I simply had no framework for this situation. It was certainly not one of the two options for which I had worn my suit. We had missed the birth and the funeral. Where had we been when the baby died? Were we fantasizing about our family's future? Were we arguing over finances? Perhaps we

were having sex, or in the midst of an early morning dream, or reading a magazine on the toilet.

I responded to this news with a gamut of emotions. My grief was knotted with anger, confusion, and fear. As though those unwanted feelings were not enough, I also felt guilt and relief. I had seemingly innumerable emotional reactions with very little sense of how to experience them, when to experience them, who to talk to about them, and how and when to move on from them. All of that was the crux of what I was facing, and I felt alone.

Months later, sadness had continued to accumulate inside of me following a second miscarriage. My younger sister's belly was now enormously pregnant. In contrast, my wife's body was thin with a tiny dandelion seed inking, a trial placement for a tattoo to commemorate our lost babies. I felt darkly moody, indecisive, and exhausted. Should I be outside with her or just remain lying in melancholy on the couch? It seemed it wouldn't matter what I did until my leveed grief broke within me. My sadness pulled at me just enough that I felt its tug, but not enough for me to know from where the pull came. Like a magnet rather than a taut rope, I couldn't seem to easily follow the tug to its source; I only felt its force reacting within me.

The first crack started when I felt sorry for myself for not building a snowman with my wife. Such childhood activities ought to always make one happy and satisfied with life, right? Well, not so, not now. My wife came in, sat on the couch, and the crack silently seeped. Eventually, she spotted my tears, and the levee was rent. "I miss our babies...I miss our babies...I miss our babies..." on and on and on inside my head, yet the words never made it out of my mouth. As my tears began to subside, "I miss our babies...I miss our babies...I miss our babies..." and again I cried. I was afraid that, without the words repeating in my head, the levee would seal itself back up.

I turned to my wife and asked her why she chose a dandelion seed to commemorate our babies. It just came to her, she replied. She explained that most people think of dandelions as weeds, something to get rid of, but they're both food and medicine for humans. I thought about when a dandelion is pulled out of the ground; it always wants to break apart, it would seem. You can remove it from sight, but it remains deeply rooted to sprout again despite all efforts to pluck it away.

Later I decided I also wanted two dandelion seed tattoos. One would be on the inside of my forearm where it would remain public. For the other, I shaved a space over my heart on my chest, tattooed the symbol, and then let the hair grow back to obscure this more private remembrance of our loss. At times, I wanted to be asked about my pain and sadness, while at other times I wanted to keep it hidden from sight, just knowing it to be so close. I didn't want to forget it, but I didn't always want to be reminded of it either.

It was painfully clear that family, friends, and even health care providers didn't know how to respond to a man's pain from miscarriage. I tried finding resources to normalize my experience, but the vast majority of what I found focused on men's supportive role with very little, if

anything, about their own experiences of grief. Compared to the information and support available for expectant women (though also limited), bereaved men have significantly less social support regarding the loss of their child. In fact, the majority of information regarding miscarriages typically focuses solely on reinforcing the necessity of men's care-giving roles toward their partners. Consequently, men are expected to support and care for their wives after early pregnancy loss while receiving little support and care themselves.

One day while making lunch for an adolescent client in a residential program, the boy asked: "You don't have kids, do you?"

Despite all the other times people have asked me that question in one form or another, I didn't know how to respond in this instance. This particular question was uniquely penetrating, leaving me wondering what part of me was divulging this information without my knowing. What of my inside was I unknowingly revealing on the outside.

Wanting to be truthful and yet cautious about crossing boundaries, I responded, "No, but my wife and I are trying."

"Yeah, I knew you didn't," he stated as a matter of fact.

Had my behavior betrayed me? Was there something I would have done differently had our babies lived? I wondered if there is something inherent in a parent of children who enters this world breathing and heart beating that I, somehow, lacked because our babies didn't make it that far? I imagined that somewhere there must be, hidden outside of my wife's and my view, a chart that measures whether the pregnancies were considered viable enough, alive enough, hope-inducing enough, that we could use to judge whether we were justified in labeling ourselves parents. Social taboo, it would appear, kept this chart tacked up on the inside of its front door, just out of sight of visitors at the doorstep, like us. It seemed that I couldn't call myself a parent, and yet we had created two children.

Among the worst were the times when people would ask my parents: "Do you have grandchildren yet?" ("You had better fucking say that you are grandparents," I would howl at them in my head.) Yet I realized that had they said yes, they would have had to answer the inevitable line of questions starting with "How many?" and "How old?" Did I really expect my parents to respond, "Well we had two grandchildren, but they were only 10 and 12 weeks when they died from miscarriage"? Those curious folks didn't want that much truth; it would have been too much. I knew very intimately how much it was indeed, and I agree, it did feel like too much. (Information like this changes things; it alters assumptions.) But all the same, I wanted to be seen as a suffering parent, not a potential parent, nor an almost-parent, but an actual parent, a father.

In all honesty, sometimes I responded to queries of my parenthood with the easy "not yet." At other times, I told inquirers about the miscarriages. Some questions were not easy to navigate

because they depended on so many known and unknown factors. Moments like these were good for me to remain mindful of when asking others questions, especially other men. And partly because so few people asked me about my experience, I decided that I was going to find out what other men thought and felt about their experiences of miscarriage.

A Father on the Inside

In the parlance of qualitative research, I was an “insider” and my experiences were dubbed “received knowledge.” In the grounded theory study I conducted, it became important for me to identify where the knowledge I had received through my experiences overlapped that of the other men. Even more, in my inner life, it was imperative that I try to identify my responses to my miscarriage experiences as well as to my research so that these internal collusions didn't take me over or obtrude on the study.

I began by considering not just what I had wanted others to ask me but also what I hadn't wanted them to ask of or say to me. I considered very carefully what I was not going to ask these men and, more importantly, why I was not going to ask these questions. The potent questions that men don't ask each other are made impotent by our fear that we will have trespassed or inadvertently singled ourselves and our experiences out as abnormal.

Early on, I wondered how much of my own story to divulge in these interviews. During one interview, I experienced a compulsion to share my story with the participant in an attempt to acknowledge and affirm the validity of what was being shared with me. On a few occasions, I did actually speak about my own experience, but most of the time I just noticed that I was feeling compelled to do so. Instead, I conveyed my understanding to the participant through reflexive listening without the risk of the participant overlapping my story with his own.

Many of the men I interviewed were courageously open about their emotions. In my first interview, I had forgotten to bring tissues. I wondered afterward what this said about me to the man I was interviewing. Had I given him the impression that I had not expected him to cry?

Not surprisingly, a lot of the participants' stories resonated with my own. Through these interviews, I began to recognize just how entwined the stories of these fathers were with their wives and just how much on the outside of the miscarriages they felt. Far more often than not, when I asked them to tell me about their stories, to describe what happened, they would recount what they witnessed and what they imagined their partners were going through at the time.

A Researcher on the Outside

If I am totally honest with myself, I had expected that conducting this research would bring me connection with other men through our experiences of miscarriage. And while, in ways, this was the case, it was also certainly a lonely and isolating experience. Being a researcher afforded me the opportunity to seek out men willing to tell me their stories and the possibility to make the

connections for which I longed. In that position, however, I had to uphold, to the best of my ability, my role as an unbiased researcher. I vacillated between wanting to connect and share with the men, to feel like an insider, and yet recognizing the obligation to keep my experience out of their stories. And so it was that my experience would continue to remain on the outside.

The greatest challenge of my study was the struggle to find a way to allow space for my experience without obtruding upon my participants' stories. The title insider researcher seemed such a painful misnomer to me. As a qualitative researcher I was responsible for remaining as unbiased as possible. To me, the difference as an insider researcher meant that I had to wrestle with this responsibility even more so. At times, I did share. Men frequently wanted to know if I knew what they were telling me, if I could relate to them. No matter how much I ended up sharing, I felt I was always going to remain on the outside, wondering whether I had shared too much. I frequently wanted to let out my emotions and tears, but as a researcher I felt compelled to keep all that hidden inside, quite the opposite from months earlier when I struggled to let my sadness out following our own miscarriages.

I had sought out men to hear their stories and discovered, all the while, the important challenge of keeping mine to myself. Yet, what I really wanted was for all of us to know that our stories were not so different. In the end, I came to realize that I had engaged in this study in part because I wanted to feel like an insider, yet my role as the researcher created distance between me and the other men. Overwhelmingly, the research revealed that we had all felt like outsiders in one way or another—outside of our partners' experiences, outside of other men's experiences, outside of the visions we had of our now-miscarried children. And ultimately, being outsiders was a key experience that had connected us.

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