

“Why Am I The Only One?”: The Experience of Non-death Loss and Grief for Chinese International High School Students in Auckland, New Zealand During COVID-19

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Abstract

This qualitative research explored the non-death loss and grief experiences of Chinese international high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Auckland, New Zealand. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six Chinese international high school students. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. This study demonstrates the complexity of non-death loss and grief experienced by international high school students during the pandemic. This study proposes that socio-cultural factors and the developmental characteristics of adolescence, rather than individual characteristics, played significant roles in contributing to, and complicating, these loss and grief experiences in the context of the global crisis. Implications for practice, research, and education are discussed.

Keywords

COVID-19, non-death loss and grief, Chinese international students, high school, adolescents

Since the global spread of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the world has experienced unprecedented changes. A multitude of losses have been, and are continuing to be, experienced by almost everyone. Alongside the loss of a loved one, there are many losses that are unrelated to the death of a significant person but occur as a consequence of other changes in our lives, such as the loss of physical contact with family and friends, the loss of job and financial security, the loss of freedom, the loss of hope for the future, and even the loss of daily routines. Such losses are particularly prevalent for international students (Hyacinth & Francis, 2022). When governments and educational institutions imposed preventive measures such as border restrictions, lockdowns, and campus or school closures, these students lost the opportunity for reunions with family and friends (Mbous et al., 2022), social connection, and access to support resources (Dhawan, 2020; Firang, 2020). Many of them, especially students from Asian countries, experienced the loss of dignity and security after becoming the victims of racial or ethnic discrimination, or even targeted attacks (Koo et al., 2023; Zhai & Du, 2020). For example, Koo et al. (2023) reported that some Asian students received anonymous emails with photos of guns threatening them to leave the country. The consequent emotional sufferings have been widely reported internationally (Lai et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

However, though international tertiary students' challenges and difficulties in the pandemic have been documented, there have been very few studies investigating international high school students' experiences. Pre-pandemic, there was considerable growth globally in the number of school-aged international students (McKeering et al, 2021). For example, since 2017 there have been more than 22,000 school-aged international students coming from different countries to New Zealand every year, of whom Chinese students account for about one third (Educationcounts, 2021). This community is often classified with their tertiary counterparts, regardless of possible differences in psychological needs, coping strategies, and support systems, owing to the discrepancy between their developmental stages.

The purpose of this small-scale study was therefore to investigate the experiences of Chinese international high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand. The research question was: What have the experiences of loss and grief been among Chinese international high school students in New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

Non-death Loss and Grief

Most theories and research on loss and grief are typically associated with bereavement (Harris, 2020). This literature on loss and grief identifies complex physical, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive components (Worden, 2009), and many theories and frameworks have been developed to understand these (e.g., Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Stroebe & Schut et al., 2010; Worden, 2008). In comparison, there has been relatively little attention given to the area of non-death-related loss and grief (Pickover & Slowik, 2013; Zeligman & Wood, 2017), even though these experiences are likely to be much more common in society. Some authors have also identified characteristics of bereavement associated with grieving for non-death losses (Harris, 2020; Papa et al., 2014), such as similar manifestations of separation distress (Bowlby, 1969), the re-construction of the self (Papa et al., 2014), and the role of meaning making in individuals' grieving (Neimeyer et al., 2010).

Of particular interest to the present study, Smith and Delgado (2020) discuss the use of grief models with non-death losses in a counselling context. They present Worden's (2009) model of the tasks of mourning, which identifies four non-linear tasks that are actively engaged with, including accepting the reality of loss, processing the pain of grief, adjusting to the absence, and finally finding and achieving an enduring connection. Similarly, they highlight the relevance of Stroebe and Schut's (1999) dual-process model for working with clients who have experienced non-death losses. This model conceptualises the oscillation between the focus on the loss itself (*loss orientation*) and the adaptation to life needed because of the loss (*restoration orientation*). The model posits that both responses are needed, and that people will oscillate between them as they find a way to cope. People may need support to work through the emotional, psychological, and social impact of their non-death loss (the loss orientation), as well to adjust to their new life situation (the restoration orientation) (Smith & Delgado, 2020).

Two additional perspectives in the loss and grief literature appear to be significantly related to non-death loss: non-finite loss and ambiguous loss. Non-finite loss (Bruce & Schultz, 2001) stems from the discrepancy between "the commonly held and internalized expectations of what the world should be like" (Bruce & Schultz, 2001, p. 37) and the reality of the person's life experience. Ambiguous loss is characterised by a continuing uncertainty as it is difficult to define and distinguish what has been

lost, how to resolve the loss, and when the suffering will end. People may also experience a lack of recognition and validation of the significance of their losses from others (Boss, 2021). Perhaps most useful in understanding non-death loss, Doka’s (1989) notion of disenfranchised grief highlights the social characteristics of grief: that certain social norms may play a part in defining which loss(es), by which griever(s), in which relationship(s), in which way, and under which circumstances may be allowed to be perceived as legitimate. Extending this, Kauffman (2002) has conceptualised that self-disenfranchisement can happen when individuals internalise social rules and then deprive themselves of their own right to grieve.

Non-death Loss and Grief in the Context of COVID-19

Compared with research focusing on bereavement-related loss and grief in the pandemic context (Carr et al., 2020; Chachar et al., 2021; Fang & Comery, 2021; Weinstock et al., 2021), few actual studies of non-death losses and grief have been conducted in relation to COVID-19 (Chew et al., 2020; Maddrell, 2020). However, a number of reviews and commentaries have been published. For example, Zhai and Du (2020) have summarised categories of both death and non-death loss and grief in the time of COVID-19 and identified the related complexities, while Walsh (2020) has identified ambiguous loss and unacknowledged loss as being significant issues. Maddrell (2020) highlighted the important meanings of daily losses for people, as the effects can be “mapped onto bodies and psyches” (p.109) and become significant, especially for vulnerable populations.

In Kumar’s (2021) review, concerns were raised over multiple forms of grief such as grief for self, relational grief, collective grief, and ecological grief. Bertuccio and Runion (2020) contextualised ambiguous loss, anticipatory grief, and complicated grief in the global pandemic and stressed that grief was a normal reaction to ongoing uncertainty and dread about the future. Masiero, et al. (2020) emphasised the social and economic meanings of non-death loss, which include the loss of role and identity, the consequences of which would be exacerbated by social divisions especially between the privileged and the disadvantaged.

Of particular interest, two empirical studies (Sirrione et al., 2021; Weaver et al., 2022) of American university students both reported multiple losses experienced by students in the wake of COVID-19 and emphasised that the most salient losses caused by the pandemic were related to the developmental markers of emerging adulthood, such as education, work opportunities and social relations.

This literature indicates that non-death loss and grief during and after COVID-19 has prevalent and profound effects on individuals, communities, and societies, which may be differentiated from those of other types of loss and grief.

Experiences of International Students During COVID-19

Despite the multiple losses in different spheres of life globally in the pandemic era, little research has been undertaken into the loss and grief experiences of international students. Most existing studies involving this cohort focus on mental health issues. For example, quantitative studies have been undertaken on mental health symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and insomnia (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021; Lai et al., 2020; Wilczewski et al., 2021), and some qualitative research has investigated what underlies these symptoms (Koo, 2021; Mbous et al., 2022; Wang, 2021). Other studies have researched the challenges and stressors faced by students, including social isolation (Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021); financial stress (Hari et al., 2021); homesickness (Mbous et al., 2022; Shoukat et al., 2021); and uncertainties related to border restrictions, quarantine policies (Hari et al., 2021; Wang, 2021) and disrupted academic and employment plans (Hari et al., 2021; Mbous et al., 2022). Discrimination, racism, and consequently, perceived threats were frequently reported as well (Koo et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2021; Wilczewski et al., 2021). Many losses—such as loss of connection, choice, safety, belonging, and hope—can be clearly recognised from these studies in relation to numerous difficulties international students experienced during COVID-19. However little research has explicitly examined these loss experiences.

The Heterogeneity of the International Student Community

International students are heterogeneous in terms of multiple factors, such as ages, identities, personalities, and values, which are influenced by developmental characteristics, nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures (Luke, 2010). Among these factors, developmental stage is an important differentiator. Adolescence involves a transitional developmental process (Bailen et al., 2019; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005), during which young people are in a process of developing a coherent and integrated identity (“who I am”) through interaction with their surroundings (Erikson, 1959). They can be seen to transform from being children, dependant on their parents, to becoming more focused on relationships with peers and exploring their identities by frequently changing their ideas and plans (Duerden et al., 2018). Barriers to adjustment that are frequently reported for adolescents are rarely reported by university students (Fontana, 2015).

Therefore, it is important to distinguish young people who study abroad during their high school years from students who study abroad at a tertiary level.

Cultural differences also contribute to their diversity. For example, research prior to the pandemic has found that Chinese international students’ coping and help-seeking behaviours were deeply influenced by the philosophies and religions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which have underpinned the development of Chinese culture (Fang, 2011; Hsu et al. 2008; Moore & Constantine, 2005; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010; Triandis 1994; Wang & Greenwood, 2015; Wei et al. 2012).

It is clear that loss and grief that arise from causes other than bereavement have begun to receive attention in the context of the pandemic. However, there is a general lack of research on non-death-related loss and grief experienced by international students. Most empirical studies involving international students concentrate on mental health or stressors and tend to pathologise emotional responses. A large portion of these studies were conducted in North America, East Asia, and Europe in 2020, particularly between March 2020 and June 2020. Furthermore, how the heterogeneity of the international student community, in terms of aspects such as their age, ethnicity, culture, host country and timeframe during the pandemic, may have played a part in their loss and grief experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic remain unknown. Thus, the present study aims to address these gaps by focusing on the non-death loss experiences of Chinese international high school students living in New Zealand one year after the outbreak of COVID-19, how they processed their grief, and how their experiences may have been influenced by the psychosocial and cultural factors in their environment.

Methodology and Methods

This small-scale study adopted a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews to investigate experiences of loss and grief among Chinese international high school students in New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used on the data. A data-driven inductive approach guided the coding based on participants’ narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Likewise, an in-depth interpretation of how loss was perceived and what grief meant to the participants necessitated a latent level of theme identification, so that the underlying nuances and complexity around participants’ experiences of loss and grief could be uncovered.

Ethics

This research was undertaken as part of the first author's Master of Counselling, supervised by the second author, and approval was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants' Ethics Committee (UAHPEC 22296). Ethical considerations regarding voluntary participation, autonomy, confidentiality, and safety were addressed. Given the shared Chinese culture of the participants and the researcher (the first author), interactions were conveyed in a culturally appropriate way to show genuineness and good intentions. Particular attention was given to the unequal power relationship between the adolescent participants and adult researcher (Dixon, 2015), especially within the context of Confucian hierarchy of values in Chinese culture (Wang, 2016).

Participants and Procedures

Purposive sampling (Fossey et al, 2002) was carried out to recruit participants in May 2021. The inclusion criteria were that each participant: (1) was an international student coming from mainland China who identified racially as Chinese; (2) was over 16 years old at the time of the interview; and (3) had been enrolled in a high school in Auckland in 2020 and had been through the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Chinese international students who were close friends or current clients of the researcher were excluded from this project. To increase the diversity among the participants (Higginbottom, 2004), recruitment was conducted in one girls' school, one boys' school and one co-educational school in Auckland. The first six students who confirmed their participation were interviewed (see Table 1).

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year	School	Place of origin	Stay period (years)
Zhu	16	Female	11	Girls' school	South China	1.5
Anna	17	Female	11	Girls' school	South China	2
White	17	Female	12	Co-educational	East China	3
Kevin	17	Male	12	Co-educational	East China	3.5
ADS	18	Male	13	Boys' school	North China	3.5
Jay	19	Male	13	Boys' school	South China	4.5

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

All six interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted face-to-face at the participants' schools after regular school hours between June and August in 2021. As participants and the researcher were of the same cultural background and fluent in Chinese, interviews were conducted in the Chinese language to help facilitate an in-depth exploration and to minimise any cultural gaps in understanding. Once an interview was completed, the recorded conversation was transcribed in Chinese and sent to each participant for editing before the information was analysed. The participants each chose a pseudonym to be used when they were quoted in the research report.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide for reflexive thematic analysis. Relevant language considerations were addressed in relation to the data collected in Chinese according to Smith et al.'s (2008) research recommendations with Chinese participants. A deep immersion in the raw data helped identify initial tentative meanings and patterns. Transcripts were kept in Chinese with tones, pauses, inflections, and so on (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to prevent the loss or distortion of rich cultural information and meaning (Smith et al., 2008). At this point in the analysis, raw data were coded in Chinese by the first author, incorporating traditional sayings and idioms used by both participants and the interviewer. The codes were then translated into English by the first author along with English summaries to facilitate an effective cross-cultural collaboration with the English-speaking second author (Smith et al., 2008). Some data extracts that were difficult to capture in English were translated in full to facilitate coding discussions while avoiding misinterpretation across languages.

NVivo was used to organise the coding process and to facilitate the generation of themes, as well as to document the process through reflexive memos (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Iterative coding and re-coding continued until related codes were categorised (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and the most salient three themes were generated. A review of coded extracts for each theme was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with some codes within the existing themes identified as contributing to two new themes. Five main themes were generated, which conveyed the overall story of the data and answered the research questions (Braun et al., 2015). Finally, selected data extracts were translated into English for the report to “provide a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93).

Findings and Discussion

Five themes were generated from the analysis: separation, mismatch, uncertainty, adjusting, and incomprehensibility. To give a sense of the personal meaning-making experience for participants, the write-up of each theme is accompanied by a question from a first-person perspective:

1. Separation: Where am I?
2. Mismatch: What might I have been?
3. Uncertainty: Where should I go?
4. Adjusting: What do I have to do?
5. Incomprehensibility: Why am I like this?

The themes are described below, illustrated by quotes from participants' narratives, along with discussion of how each theme links with existing literature.

1. Separation – Where am I?

Participants experienced a profound sense of separation. Though this experience was also noted in pre-COVID-19 studies (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang et al, 2014), this theme was amplified by the pandemic and associated government health measures. This gave an overall sense of “Where am I?”, as if students were disorientated and a bit lost. All participants highlighted the sense of being separated from significant people and there seemed to be an *internalised* separation developing, that was psychological as well as physical. As one participant, Anna, put it, “I’m really homesick. I haven’t seen my family for two years. I haven’t seen my friends for two years. And, I haven’t done things I love for two years.”

Another participant, Zhu, explained this weakening bond as a form of alienation: “For me, there is a sense of distance from these influences [that I had in China]. I can’t synchronise with these since I’ve been unable to go home... [I feel] alienated as well ...”.

Racism and discrimination that followed the outbreak of COVID-19 also contributed to the sense of separation. Some participants who had experienced street insults had mixed senses of stigma, unfairness, and powerlessness, which led to a sense of being marginalised and a loss of connection with the environment that they had been trying to fit into. For example, Zhu stated that “If they treat us like, a rubbish or virus... it would feel uncomfortable and terrible, [because] it cannot be like in my home country that everyone is the same.”

The sensed separation led to an intense desire for close bonds with their previous lifestyles, customs, and the motherland, through which they grieved their loss of connection with their pasts. For example, losing the opportunity to go home and spend the Spring Festival with family, one of the most important traditions in Chinese culture, was emphasised by all participants. Interestingly, food worked as a visceral bond with home; “the taste” of Chinese food was often referred to by participants. For example, Kevin preferred eating food in China because “they have the taste” while Jay noted that it was “the taste” evoking his memory of being with family.

2. Mismatch – What Might I Have Been?

Participants reported significant losses of expectations and dreams for their overseas life, since the pandemic spread worldwide, which incurred deep regrets about “What might I have been?”. Following multiple restrictions, such as border restrictions, national lockdowns, and school closures, the mismatch between their expectations of overseas life and the perceived reality caused a strong sense of being locked up, with a mixture of helplessness, vulnerability, and frustration for all participants. Jay complained about being alone and his lack of motivation. White recalled that she had become quite down and often locked herself in her room during the first lockdown, which resonated with Anna’s description of herself as being in “psychological self-isolation” and Zhu’s comment: “I’m feeling [I have] been sentenced to life imprisonment. New Zealand is a big prison.”

These findings parallel the assumptive worlds construct (Harris, 2020) and indicate the loss of consistency for participants between what should have been and what their reality was after their previous plans and dreams had been disrupted in the wake of COVID-19. White and Kevin were upset that they had been unable to celebrate significant milestones with parents and old friends. Zhu was so sad and frustrated that she was considering giving up her dream of being a candidate at a university in America, considering her experiences of discrimination in New Zealand and the escalating conflicts between China and the United States. ADS poignantly articulated this mismatch by describing the hope for his parents to attend his high school graduation ceremony as they had been absent from “every important moment” (ADS) in his life. This expectation had been shattered owing to the travel bans.

Along with these lost hopes and expectations, participants experienced the loss of a quality, a better version of themselves. Every participant articulated that they could have made a better choice, or performed better, and that they would have enjoyed happiness if the pandemic had not happened. For instance, White had been struggling with suicidal thoughts during the period of the first lockdown. She still felt angry, regretful, and upset when she looked back at her experience: “If there was no COVID, some unpleasant things would not have happened and I would have been better last year, in every aspect!”

Most existing literature categorises this sort of experience in relation to COVID-19-related stressors (Lai et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2020), changes in activities or behaviour (Solomou et al., 2021), or life and academic satisfaction (Wilczewski et al., 2021), and focuses on the related emotional reactions or psychological symptoms (Koo, 2021; Solomou et al., 2021; Wilczewski et al., 2021). While this is consistent with the findings of the current study, it misses the more existential sense of longing and helplessness, of being the ‘wrong version’ of oneself.

3. Uncertainty – Where Should I Go?

The study findings indicate that the loss of certainty for participants led to fear and confusion about their future: “Where should I go?” This is similar to findings reported among international university students facing uncertainty around the international climate, domestic policies, community hostility, institutional measures (Wang, 2021), visa renewal, legal residency (Koo, 2021), placement cancellation, and financial stress (Mbous et al., 2022). However, an overarching struggle as to whether to go home or not dominated participants’ responses in the present study. Homesickness kept calling them home. But the participants’ ambivalence about the choice between travelling home and continuing study in light of the travel bans by the New Zealand government hindered their further actions, because as Anna stated, “we all know that actually we can go back, but we also know that we are unable to return to New Zealand [and continue our study]”. Zhu captured this disturbing sense of being in limbo: “I still want to go back to my own country, but my life in New Zealand also needs to continue in the future... I don’t know which one I should choose ...”

Complicating the struggle, no matter what decision was made, endless concerns and feelings of fear, vulnerability, and loss of control occurred once participants considered the consequences. ADS and Jay, two Year 13 students, were restless about their university study in the next year: “How long will I be forced to suspend

the course?” (ADS); “I’m concerned about my study quality in this remote way that I may hardly learn anything ...” (Jay). The fear even evoked a sense of losing belonging, and of loneliness: “If I keep staying here, I will lose the connection with all my people in China. It feels... lonely. If I disconnect with China, I don’t know where to go. I’m afraid of losing connections [with them]” (Zhu).

Interestingly, within this uncertainty can be seen aspects of the transition of adolescents from childhood to adulthood. There is a striving for the development of independence and agency (von Tetzchner, 2022), while perceiving guidance, support, and encouragement from parents as still essential for them to get through challenges (Branje et al., 2002; Lee & Lok, 2012). The participants explicitly disclosed how they had longed for bonds with their parents when their navigation between being a child and being an adult had been interrupted by the pandemic. As Anna said:

Like university students, they are more independent. For high school students, the biggest challenge is being away home for two years. Maybe [we are] independent as well, but we are less mature, and we really miss home, and two years is too long. It’s too hard for a high school student...

It is apparent here that when the unknowns and fear resulting from the pandemic magnified their vulnerability and powerlessness, these high school students may have had stronger needs to keep close bonds with parents (Lee & Lok, 2012) than their tertiary counterparts.

4. Adjusting – What Do I Have to Do?

This study highlights how participants adjusted to the ongoing changes in their situation and dealt with their loss and grief. At the same time, despite participants’ resilience and strengths, these measures of adjustment seemed utterly inadequate for ending their frustration about the question of “What do I have to do?” There were two salient features present in relation to this process of adjustment. First, adjusting was a constant, shifting, and dynamic process that participants had navigated at their own pace. The second feature was the underlying cultural complexity in the way participants navigated their grieving processes.

Through compromising and adjusting to their reality, participants attempted to tolerate their losses and see good aspects out of the negative experiences. For example, ADS commented, comparing the present to the past: “At least now I have more chances to talk to my parents in a digital way.” Participants also made

new meanings from what they had experienced and highlighted positive personal growth. For instance, White had deepened her understanding of who she was after she had gone through the tough time on her own: “I looked at it as a challenge and I got over it. I feel proud of myself.” Some participants paid more attention to what needed to be dealt with and what made their life more bearable. For example, using the internet was a major and pragmatic way to keep connected when they were physically distanced from family and friends. However, they could not just let go of what they had lost. Anna said: “Sometimes after a lovely conversation, it feels like, I really want to go home. I really want to see my friends in person and hang out together.”

This back-and-forth navigation seems to resonate with the oscillation process in Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) dual-process model. At times, participants showed attachment to what they had lost, while other times they focused more on what needed to be dealt with and how to deal with it, so that they could get away from the distress for a while. This moving-in-and-out exploration amidst the pandemic appears similar to findings reported by Walsh (2020) about the complexity of adapting to loss and recovering from grief for the general population during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interestingly, the theme of “adjusting” also appears to have a cultural component. Many participants indicated that they experienced a sense of relief when they downplayed their loss and highlighted the good sides of the adversity. This is consistent with Xia and Duan’s (2020) study of Chinese international students, who reported more positive experiences after adopting the same strategy to regulate their thinking and emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This way of coping could be recognised as a typical self-regulation strategy rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy including Confucian belief in reframing adversity and Taoist dialectical thinking (Fang, 2011; Jing, 2006; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010). However, similar behaviour by young American adults of minimising their grief experiences during the pandemic was identified as self-disenfranchisement by Weaver et al. (2022). This suggests that a certain grief reaction might be perceived differently, even conversely, through different cultural lenses.

Moreover, findings from the present study indicate that in order to stay safe in the face of a challenging environment, participants protected themselves by minimising or avoiding various potential troubles in the context of COVID-19. For example, some participants avoided talking about “sensitive topics” (White)

related to discrimination or international situations, and some preferred not to fight back against provocations from hostile people because “the less trouble the better” (Kevin). Interestingly, this attitude of avoiding trouble may have hindered participants from seeking help from their surroundings, because some of them tended to consider it as “causing trouble for others” (Jay) and “I don’t want to get them upset for me” (ADS).

Rather than being dysfunctional, these ‘avoidance’ actions could be related to the value of harmony in Confucianism and the importance of “pursuing a conflict-free interpersonal and social relationship” (Chen, 2001, p. 57). Adding further complexity, rather than being interpreted from a unitary classical Confucian view (Young, 2017), the findings in this study illustrate two dimensions of harmony-seeking, which is more consistent with Leung et al.’s (2002) dualistic model of harmony. That is, people may avoid conflict or trouble by maintaining harmony either to help protect themselves in a situation sensed as insecure, or as a goal in itself, in line with their cultural values. Clearly there are complex cultural nuances in how people adjust to and cope with their loss and grief.

5. Incomprehensibility - Why Am I Like This?

Findings in the current study demonstrate how the lack of acknowledgement and emotional safety from their surroundings contributed to the participants’ difficulty in making sense of their loss and grief. More and more confusion and powerlessness resulted in wondering “Why am I like this?”. Participants reported that their losses had been ignored or discounted, or their grieving was not seen as legitimate. For example, all participants stressed the impact of the travel ban on “people like me” (Anna) and that “the most helpful thing [for international students] is to open the border” (Kevin). Some participants sensed a loss of justice, respect, and equality as a member of their ethnicity group in relation to the so-called “Chinese virus” (White). Zhu felt upset about receiving few responses when she shared her experience of street insults in a class, as if voicing her feelings was unwanted: “I don’t think local people have any empathy [for us] ... [I feel] they won’t put themselves in our shoes.”

Some could not figure out what had happened and occasionally struggled with self-loathing: “[Compared to the local students], we’re all in the same age. Why do I suddenly become down? Why am I the only one who looks withdrawn?” (Anna). Some “didn’t talk [about this topic] with others” (Kevin), while others had only started to think about this since the interview.

I haven't thought about this so much before, and I don't know why I need to think about this, but all of a sudden, I'm thinking of a lot of questions... Usually I won't talk about this topic with my friends ... If [I have more opportunities to talk to them], I may not be so reluctant and think so hard. (Jay)

Although some previous studies have reported international university students' sense of insecurity (Koo et al., 2023), and their experience of being overlooked or dismissed (Eliot, 2021) during the pandemic, there are few articles recognising potential connections to underlying disenfranchised grief or ambiguous loss. According to Doka (2002), losses, whether death or non-death-related, are disenfranchised socially if they are unrecognised, underestimated, or hidden due to certain social norms. In this study, the disenfranchisement of participants' loss occurred due to a number of factors. International students' state of being in-between their own culture and the host culture played an important part, as different rules govern 'normal' cognition, behaviour, and emotion in each society (Harris, 2020). Further, being part of a minority amid a mainstream culture meant participants' losses were not accommodated or supported in the host country in the same way they might be in their home country (Menculini et al., 2021). Participants thus reported feeling their grief was not accepted socially and their right to grieve "differently" was marginalised.

An added complexity here is the cultural emphasis on harmony and relationships (Wei & Li, 2013) mentioned in relation to the previous theme of "adjusting". This may have contributed to the concealment of participants' emotional needs to avoid imposing a burden on others (Martin-Matthews et al., 2013). Similarly, in the context of the significant global hardships and loss of life during the pandemic, grieving for non-bereavement losses may have seemed unacceptable when others had lost their loved ones and livelihoods (Kaur-Aujla et al., 2022).

Likewise, many ambiguous losses have been brought up by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bertuccio & Runion, 2020; Boss, 2021). Participants remained restless about how long the situation would last and confused about the changes associated with the world and themselves. Along with these, participants were faced with the ambiguity of significant people in their lives being psychologically present but physically absent, such as parents or friends in their home country only being contactable online (Bertuccio & Runion, 2020). Moreover, a lack of developmental maturity to accommodate and process complex loss and grief experiences (Rowling, 2002) may have contributed to participants' sense of

ambiguous loss. In this study, all participants experienced difficulties in linking their emotional distress to loss and grief in the context of the pandemic, which may play a part in the reinforcement of ambiguous loss.

Embedded within these narratives, there also appeared to be indications of self-disenfranchisement of grief (Kauffman, 2002) when the participants minimised and suppressed their feelings or did not allow themselves to grieve. For example, Zhu commented on her distress in relation to the difficulties: “It’s probably not a big deal. Probably because I didn’t experience it before.” White believed, regarding her suicidal ideation: “I took things too hard.” This is particularly interesting as it seems to contradict some aspects of the findings indicated in the previous theme of “adjusting” and may reveal additional layers of cultural complexity around participants understanding their own and others’ grieving processes.

Summary of Key Findings

This research offers new insights that contextualise loss and grief experiences of international students during and after the outbreak of COVID -19 for those working with them. A key finding is the need to expand common, possibly limited, understandings of loss and grief in the age of the global pandemic (Albuquerque et al., 2021; Walsh, 2020), given the unprecedented nature of what everyone has experienced since the outbreak of COVID-19. Another significant finding is that international students experienced pandemic-related loss and grief in complex ways specific to their cultural context. This study indicates that there were many layers of overlapping losses related to the pandemic, with multiple levels and forms, which incorporated personal, relational, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Considering the very few studies on non-death-related loss and grief during COVID-19, this study contributes to existing knowledge as well as presenting a need for more research examining how people are influenced by the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, both within and beyond the educational sector. Given the prevalence of non-death loss events and the potential for individuals’ grief being disenfranchised, it could be helpful to have a course focused on these forms of grief available to counsellors and others training in relevant fields, incorporating in-depth knowledge of these common phenomena and diverse exercises in working in culturally sensitive ways with those affected by such losses.

This research also identifies the considerable role that psychosocial factors played in international students' grief experiences in the face of the pandemic. Apart from the disenfranchisement of ambiguous loss and non-finite loss, due to the ambiguity of their nature (Harris, 2020), many more direct and tangible losses these international students who participated in this study had experienced were disenfranchised by the different social norms in New Zealand. Further research is needed on how psychosocial factors in the environment may influence how international students evolve, process, and cope with their grief experiences.

This study also underscores the heterogeneity within the international student community for those working with non-death loss and grief amidst international high school students. Particularly, the developmental differences between tertiary students and high school students should not be underestimated or overlooked. Scholars have indicated that maturity can play a significant role in the ability to accommodate and process loss and grief experiences, especially in relation to ambiguous loss (Harris, 2020; Rowling, 2002). More research needs to be conducted with adolescent international students rather than simply applying what has been learned from international university students.

In addition, cultural complexity calls for more attention as every culture has its unique ways of perceiving, processing, and coping with grief. Assumptions from western constructions of human emotion, behaviour, and cognition may lead to intercultural misunderstandings and undermine cultural strengths. For example, considering that Chinese international students in this study may have regarded help-seeking behaviour as "causing trouble to others", the complexity of how the Confucian value of harmony affects coping with loss and grief needs to be further investigated. Similarly, there would seem to be cultural complexities around understanding the dynamics of self-disenfranchisement. Within the theme of "adjusting", reactions that appear to fit the definition of self-disenfranchisement may actually act as helpful cultural tools to self-regulate and successfully aid people to cope with their situation. While considering the complexity of Chinese culture, which mainly integrates Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, the seemingly self-disenfranchised thoughts and behaviours in the theme of "incomprehensibility" are very likely the embodiment of the cultural values of self-enlightenment, transcendence from the self and secularity, and forbearance when facing suffering (Moore et al., 2005; Tyson & Pongruengphant, 2007; Yip, 2004).

Given this perspective, rather than attempting to distinguish between self-disenfranchisement and self-regulation, it probably makes more sense to look at them as two sides of the same coin.

To avoid marginalising different cultural ways of being and meaning-making around loss and grief, these types of cultural dynamics need more attention in all aspects of counselling, including practice, theory, and research. It is also advantageous to pay increased attention to multicultural perspectives in loss and grief education to avoid applying culturally inappropriate interpretations of international clients' experiences.

Implications for Counselling Practice

The study highlights the complex nature of multiple non-death losses that Chinese international high school students may bring into the counselling room. It may be helpful for counsellors to understand certain “symptoms” of loss and grief in the context of a culturally adaptive, client-centred and supportive grieving process, rather than problematising these reactions and labelling them as “maladaptive”. This could include increasing awareness of the cultural complexities and nuances around disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss, and how psychosocial factors in the environment may influence the coping processes of Chinese or other international high school students. This is particularly important in order to mitigate the potential for disenfranchisement to be enacted in the counselling room due to a counsellor misunderstanding or misinterpreting a client's grief and loss process. Helping grievers to name their losses and to normalise their grief experiences in a culturally appropriate way could assist them to shift from disenfranchisement to enfranchisement. This could involve working with Chinese clients to support their use of cultural resources such as the adaptive nature of Confucian harmony, as well as drawing on cultural wisdoms from Buddhism and Taoism.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Differing from previous research that mainly studied external stressors and pathological symptoms regarding the effects of the COVID -19 pandemic on international students, this study focused on their lived experiences of non-death loss, even though the findings might be limited by the research period and location. Apart from relevant individual factors involved in the grieving process, this study also provides new insights into how social and cultural factors may have complicated grieving processes in the era of COVID-19. In retrospect, some

culture-specific characteristics could have been more deeply explored during the interviews, such as how talking about loss and grief may have felt for Chinese adolescents and how they may have interpreted the role of traditional cultural values in their experiences.

This research highlights the unique characteristics of adolescent international students that differentiate them from international students at tertiary level and has helped them give voice to their plights during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the small-scale nature of the project may have hindered some relevant factors from being explored, such as the relationship between the experience of loss and grief and the development of adolescent identity in the context of COVID-19.

There is a close relationship between the first author, who was an international student while working with international students, and the research phenomena. This was a strength that enabled the first author to contribute her knowledge, experience, and understanding of their world to the interpretation of the data but every effort was made to avoid this becoming a limitation, as her personal perspectives had the potential to narrow the interpretation of the data.

Conclusion

This study focused on the lived experience of non-death loss in multiple levels and forms related to the pandemic. Apart from relevant individual factors involved in grieving processes, this study provides new insights into how developmental as well as socio-cultural factors may have complicated the grieving of Chinese international high school students in the era of COVID-19. It also shines a light on the potential for cultural ways of responding to crises being marginalised and misinterpreted. We hope this study helps the voices and plights of vulnerable young people, specifically adolescent international students, to be more clearly heard not only in the context of the global pandemic but also in a post- COVID-19 era.

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