

Academic constructions of bereavement

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ABSTRACT *This paper takes the form of a literature review to trace and evaluate the different and changing theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary perspectives through which Western, mainly UK social scientists (i.e., psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists), have sought to understand and address the experience of bereavement during the twentieth century. Such an overview is timely in relation to the rapidly changing nature of Western society around the turn of the century. It examines how the science-based discourse of modernity has shaped such perspectives and the extent to which this has obscured, as well as revealed, important aspects of the bereavement experience. It considers the potential of recent “postmodernist” approaches, which prioritize qualitative methods, and the subjective experiences of bereaved individuals to allow a fuller engagement with this complex and challenging dimension of social life. In so doing it aims to demonstrate how the inadequacy of modernist perspectives in addressing the complexity and diversity of current Western deathways has produced a paradigm shift. It identifies the way such a shift is opening up new areas of inquiry.*

KEYWORDS: literature review; bereavement perspectives; modernity and postmodernity; resocializing grief

Introduction

The profound and lasting impact that bereavement can have on the lives of individuals and social groups points to the importance of assessing its academic constructions in view of their influence on social policy and practice. By taking twentieth century bereavement literature as a topic of investigation, sociologists have identified a tension between the discourses of science and nature. This has produced a conceptual and disciplinary split in which the grief of modern Westerners has been psychologized and medicalized, while the mourning or ritual behaviour of pre-modern and non-Western others has been exoticized and romanticized (Hockey, 1996, 2001; Walter, 1999). This has occurred within a positivist paradigm in which the prioritizing of quantitative methods has excluded the subjective experiences of self-reflecting individuals and how they make sense of their world. Rather, the experiences and responses of the bereaved are viewed in

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isolation from their social world and in the light of psychological measures of what constitutes normal and healthy grieving.

It has been argued that such an approach reflects the science-based discourse of modernity rather than the experiences of the bereaved (Hockey, 1996). These can only be accessed via qualitative approaches that require an active, empathic, and reflexive engagement with the other (Bradbury, 1999, p. 26), and more open-ended exploratory approaches. This allows the generation of rich contextual data that capture the process of meaning-making and the complexity of human relationships. It includes an appreciation of our intersubjectivity and the partiality, contingency, and relativity of our interpretations and explanations. This more recent approach has been seen to reflect a growing postmodern perspective that is challenging modernity's rationalizing discourse to reveal grief's "bigger picture" (Small & Hockey, 2001, p. 120).

By means of a literature review, these observations are further developed in the light of the impact of the increasing fragmentation, individualism, and multiculturalism of current Western society. This includes an examination of the bereavement literature generated by Western (mainly UK) social scientists (i.e., psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists). A few (English language) European studies are included, and some reference is made to American and Australian literature in view of its significant impact on European thinking. Key texts, those most frequently cited in the bereavement literature, have been selected to trace how theoretical perspectives have evolved over the course of the twentieth century. On the basis of the selected texts, this paper identifies and explores the implications of a significant change in approach that characterizes the three disciplines. Presentation is thematic rather than chronological, so as not to give the misleading impression of a straightforward linear progression. This underlines the way that new constructions emerge as scattered and intermittent challenges to the prevailing orthodoxy and subsequently gather momentum. Also, there is no rigid dividing line between modernist and postmodernist thinking, with some studies showing influences from both approaches. Moreover, the multifaceted nature of the topic precludes any uniform development.

Findings and discussion

Taking each of the three disciplines in turn, findings are organized around key themes representing the way academic constructions of bereavement have changed over the course of the twentieth century. Beginning with the contribution of psychology, reflecting its dominance in the field, section 1 traces a culture of prescription, by means of which grief has been medicalized and pathologized. It identifies how the inadequacy of such an approach has led to a resocializing of grief which has generated a dialogue between psychologists and sociologists.

Section 2 provides evidence of anthropology's exoticizing of pre-industrial deathways. It includes how these have been emotionalized, functionalized,

and symbolized to form a critique of modern Western deathways. It identifies a recent revisioning of current deathways, which includes their personalization, diversification, redefinition, and repositioning. Reference is made to the contribution of social historians in placing current deathways in their wider historical context.

Section 3 draws attention to sociology's denial of death with reference to studies that identify death's sequestration and promote its humanization. It explores sociology's contribution to the recent resocializing of grief as a result of an increased focus on meaning-making, agency, diversity, discourse, narrative, reflexivity, and intersubjectivity. It considers the way this has opened up disciplinary boundaries.

Section 1: Psychology

The psychologizing of grief

The understanding and management of grief has been informed by a "normalizing psychology" (Prior, 1989). This has focused on the internal private worlds of individuals in isolation from their social world. Rooted in the scientific paradigm, it is concerned with rationalization, reducing the variety of human experience to measurable data from which generalizations, models, and prescriptions can be developed (Hockey, 1996; Small, 2001). It is based on an assumption of universalism, or "psychic unity of mankind" (Huntingdon & Metcalf, 1979, p. 18) characteristic of Western modernity. This has produced an approach to grief that is tied up with a controllable and calculable universe that can be mastered through human praxis (Prior, 1997, p. 189).

A "discipline of the therapeutic" (Small, 2001, p. 39) has evolved in the form of specialist counselling services. These can be seen to offer the bereaved a supportive space to work through their grief, something not readily available amidst the demands and pressures of late modern living. However such services may also marginalize and separate bereavement from ordinary life, giving rise to a "cult of the expert" that runs the risk of disempowering people (Small, and Hockey 2001 p. 116). This raises the question "If the professionals move in does the neighbourhood move out?" (Raphael, 1998).

Such marginalization of bereavement reflects a discourse in which the primary goal of "grief work" is the "severing of ties" with the deceased in order to be able to reinvest in new attachments. This is based on selective readings of the authorities, particularly Freud's *Mourning and melancholia* (1917[1915]), and theories based on data obtained from white, middle-class, and predominantly female populations divorced from their social context (Marris, 1958, 1986; Parkes, 1972, 1986, 1996). It has produced variations on a universalized model that constructs grief as a 'goal-directed activity' rather than a "state of being." This involves processes of "letting go" and "moving on" in order to return to "normal" functioning.

Prescriptions for grief

Yet this was not Freud's original emphasis, which was to explore the difference between grief and depression. However, his attempt to understand certain mental states has, through professional usage, been translated into a generalized prescription by which grief can be managed and normalized. Bowlby's complex and nuanced attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980; Stroebe, 2002) and its development by Parkes have been subject to a similar process. Parkes' findings led him to identify grief as a "process and not a state" which "involves a succession of clinical pictures which blend into and replace one another . . ." (Parkes, 1986, p. 27). These include "numbness," "pining," "disorganization and despair" leading to "recovery" (Parkes, 1972, 1983). In popular and professional discourse, Parkes' ideas have become a fixed sequence through which every bereaved individual must pass in order to "recover" (Walter, 1999, pp. 161–163; Wortman & Silver, 1989). His original focus on widows has been lost.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of dying (1970), i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, have similarly been turned into a universal prescription and applied to bereavement as well. In relation to dying, the final stage of "acceptance" has become "the universally desired outcome for all dying individuals" (Samerel, 1995), in spite of Kubler-Ross's insistence that not all people experience all stages, nor were they necessarily linear. Charmaz has suggested that such a theory is more reflective of adaptation to the social context in which the dying occurred (Charmaz, 1980). Yet, social context has been obscured by the demands of prescription, as in Worden's "tasks of mourning" (Worden, 1982, 1991). A popular basis for bereavement counselling these include: accepting the reality of the loss, working through its pain, adjusting to life without the deceased, emotionally relocating the deceased, and moving on with life.

Cross-cultural analyses have been used to uncover "universal truths" about the nature of emotional experience. Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson surveyed grief and mourning in 78 cultures concluding: "American practices and behaviours are a relatively safe base from which to generalize about the species" (Rosenblatt *et al.*, 1976, p. 23). According to Raphael, different cultural practices show the "universality" of grief and "also reflect the recognition of some of its basic processes" (Raphael, 1984, p. 65). Alongside an exoticizing of ethnic beliefs, practices, and values (see section 2), this has fed into a popular portrayal of ethnic minorities as "irrational," or "inferior, implying that they should adopt Western modes of grieving (Field, Hockey, & Small, 1997, p. 17). Initial attempts to tackle such discrimination and promote "cultural sensitivity" have amounted to giving more information to health professionals about the cultural practices of minority groups (Gunaratnam, 1997). Yet within a modernist framework, this has produced factfiles of cultural and religious prescriptions that exclude individual variation and subjective experience (Gunaratnam, 1997).

Such universalism has tended to overshadow dissenting voices: Eisenbruch has drawn attention to the way that "the schemata devised by Western thanatologists describe the normative stages of the grief process of Westerners. Yet more than

three-quarters of the world's population are non-Western. The indiscriminate application of Western models of grief to other ethnic and cultural groups is an example of Kleinmann's (1977) 'category fallacy'" (Eisenbruch, 1984, p. 324). Rosenblatt has since revised his earlier view to acknowledge how "Western cultural concepts such as 'dying' and 'grief' originated in the context of its culture. It now seems that realities differ so greatly from culture to culture that it is misleading and ethnocentric to assume that western concepts apply generally" (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 13).

Medicalizing and pathologizing grief

Tentative and nuanced theories attempting to convey grief's inner turmoil have thus been recast as universally applicable models and strategies of intervention aimed at solving such turmoil. This includes developing prescriptions in terms of stages, phases, and tasks and the notions of recovery and resolution. A normal, though painful, part of life has become a condition that needs treating. Grief has been medicalized by means of such terms as morbid, unresolved, abnormal, complicated, chronic, prolonged, and the like. This places the focus on the individual's internal world rather than the social environment.

Though representing an oversimplification and distortion of some of the theory, this approach has been reinforced by the overly scientific and technical jargon used by theorists. Lindemann's "symptomology" of grief and the notion of "grief management" (Lindemann, 1944), have provided a classic description of grief reactions. Engel (1961) likened grief to a "disease" and a "syndrome," thinking this would facilitate its scientific study and improve its medical management by making it easier to diagnose and treat. Psychometric measuring scales, such as the "Texas Grief Inventory" (Faschingbauer, Devaul, & Zisook, 1977) have been developed to grade grief's "symptoms" according to severity. As well as being reductionist, these have discursive power to prioritize certain needs over others and pathologize and discredit certain experiences.

Thus "sensing the presence of the deceased" has been viewed as illusory and pathological, part of the futile "searching" stage of early grief. Indeed, it has been included in the symptomatology of "acute" grief (Gorer, 1965; Lindemann, 1944; Marris, 1958). Yet such experiences refuse to be psychologized away, though individuals may convey some ambivalence as to their status. Using a narrative approach, Bennett and colleagues (Bennet, 1999; Bennett & Bennett, 2001) highlight the tension between modernist and postmodernist discourses in the way the bereaved articulate their experiences, the apparently contradictory expressions "as if he was there" and "I really saw him" occurring in the same narratives.

Others may be more equivocal, as found by Littlewood (2001). A number of widows expressed dissatisfaction with the conventional wisdom, particularly notions of "resolution" and "complicated grief." These women had no intention of resolving their loss or giving up their attachment to their dead husband. In terms of the literature this could be seen as chronic grief. Yet they were not expressing any belief or hope that their husbands would return to them or avoiding

the reality of their deaths. “Rather, they were expressing the ability and desire to conduct an ongoing relationship with the person they knew to be dead” (Littlewood, 2001, p. 85).

Resocializing grief

Such challenges to modernist perspectives have opened up new areas of inquiry in relation to the “continuing bonds” people maintain with their dead (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). This theme is being developed across the disciplines (Walter, 1996; Francis, Kellaher, & Neophytou, 2001, 2005). This includes the use of reflexivity, discursive and narrative approaches that allow an increased focus on “the reality of how people experience and live their lives rather than finding ways of verifying preconceived theories of how people should live” (Klass *et al.*, 1996, p. xix). This has revealed grief as profoundly social and highly varied, and opened up a dialogue between psychologists and sociologists. This includes the diversity within cultures and between individuals, as well as different types of losses. The “dual process” model (Stroebe & Schut, 2001) offers a more flexible approach, which allows for gender and cultural differences. Yet this still focuses on identifying core features that characterize “healthy grieving,” a perspective that is proving increasingly inadequate in relation to the complexity and diversity of current Western society (Currer, 2001, pp. 54–55).

Section 2: Anthropology

Exoticizing the other

Anthropological accounts have supplied the therapeutic community with examples of a more natural way of dealing with death. These have tended to “romanticize” and “exoticize” the ritual activities of “primitive peoples” (Gunaratnam, 1997) who have been conceived as “other” and surveyed at a “distance” (Hockey, 1996). Such a perspective has turned them into something to be discovered and understood by the cultivated Western anthropologist. This assumes that the meaning of such outer behaviour is transparent and can be “read” rather than being mediated by individual agendas and priorities (Hockey, 2001, p. 202).

Such studies have highlighted the social construction of bereavement and demonstrated the diversity of ritual behaviour around the world. However, until recently, such observations failed to penetrate the prevailing therapeutic discourse. This has produced a conceptual split between ethnographic studies of “outer, observable behaviour” and psychological studies of “internal worlds” (Hockey, 2001). As a result, and with the benefit of a long tradition of anthropological research in the UK, we probably know much more about the variety of deathways in pre-modern societies than we do in the contemporary West (Walter, 1993).

The privileging of emotionality

The assumption is that more elaborate, traditional ritual forms effectively address the psychological needs of the bereaved in a way that the simpler forms of the current west do not (Gorer, 1965). This includes mediating existential anxieties and maintaining a sense of community. By comparison, today's ritual has been described as unimaginative, impoverished, and meaningless, the processes of modernization having robbed us of our capacity to deal with death (Albery, Eliot, & Eliot, 1993). It further assumes that emotionality is central to shaping the bereavement experience, the emotional responses of those living closer to nature being healthier than ours.

Yet the anthropological literature fails to sustain such assumptions. Rather, urgent social issues may take precedence over individual grief. The funerals of the LoDogaa of West Africa were organized to minimize conflict over inheritance (Goody, 1962). By prioritizing emotion, the disposal of the deceased's assets has been largely overlooked in relation to current Western societies (Finch & Wallis, 1993). Far from being constructed as "natural," for the Bororo of South America death was a violation (Boas, 1911/1965; cited Hockey, 1996), and for the Azande the result of witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard, 1937/1972; cited Hockey, 1996), in both cases provoking vengeance. Radcliffe-Brown has suggested that ritual can actually invoke rather than relieve anxiety (Radcliffe-Brown, 1964; cited Gunaratnam, 1997).

The functionalizing of death ritual

Yet such evidence has been overshadowed by a preoccupation with emotionality and the universalizing requirements of grand theory. Durkheim's study of the death ritual of the Australian Warramunga (1912/1965) demonstrates his theory of social integration. Based on a reified, deterministic, and functionalist model of society as an "entity" acting in itself (Bloch & Parry, 1982, p. 6), Durkheim argued that ritual weeping promoted social solidarity in the face of death's threat to the social order. Similar broad functionalist claims are made in Radcliffe-Brown's study of the Andamanese. His careful contextual analysis of the symbolism of weeping, which explores its links with key values of Andaman society (Huntingdon & Metcalf, 1979, p. 27), is subordinated to the conclusion that "the purpose of the rite is to affirm the existence of a social bond between two or more persons" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1964, p. 240).

The symbolization of death ritual

Though similarly driven by theoretical concerns, Hertz provided a focus that placed death at the centre and emphasized the regenerative power of mortuary ritual (Davies, 2000). This was the custom of secondary burial by the Dyak of Borneo, which he used to demonstrate the general tendency toward representing death through the manipulation of the corpse. By exploring the interaction

between mourners and the corpse, Hertz concluded that death was experienced as a gradual process rather than instantaneous. This produced his central thesis that a funeral rite can be seen as a transition that begins with the separation of the deceased from life and ends with the soul's incorporation into the society of the dead (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 56). This represented a triumph of society over death in which "the notion of death is linked with resurrection, exclusion is always followed by a new integration" (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 79).

Hertz did not consider "negative cases" and generalized from limited second hand data. Yet he engaged with both structural and symbolic dimensions of social behaviour, providing the basis and inspiration for much subsequent work. This included an appreciation of the nature and centrality of the transitional phase of mortuary ritual or "intermediary period" (Hertz, 1907/1960, pp. 29–53), which was shared by Van Gennep (1909/1960) and applied to ritual generally. Van Gennep's tripartite "rites of passage" scheme has become the primary way of conceptualizing the shifts in social identity that occur throughout the life course (Hockey, 2002).

Bloch and Parry (1982) have further explored the symbolism of resurrection in their cross-cultural analyses. This includes a more dynamic concept of society as an authority which must be continually created, rather than as an entity in itself. Death rituals provide a means of ensuring the smooth transition of power and status by which death is transformed into new life. This perspective allows political questions to be asked about who is involved in organizing such rituals and to what ends.

Revisioning and personalizing current deathways

Such representations of death have been seen as less applicable to contemporary Western individualistic societies in which a person's death poses less of a threat to the social order (Blauner, 1966; Bloch and Parry, 1982, p. 15). This has formed part of the critique of modern death ritual as lacking the support offered by the rich symbolism of other cultures (Albery, 1993). Yet, Davies notes the similarities between contemporary cremation and Herz's secondary burial (Davies, 1997). Recent qualitative studies that focus on lay rituals and practices reveal how present day "memorialization is a flourishing custom from which participants extract meaning" (Bradbury, 2001, p. 218). Such rites are "often creative and highly idiosyncratic, reflecting the tastes and the emotions of the family involved" (Bradbury, 2001, p. 221).

Javeau (2001) describes the way dispersal lawns in crematoria in Belgium are covered with "flowers, photographs of the deceased, small copper plaques bearing the names of those whose ashes have been dispersed, and other signs of mourning . . ." For the death of a loved one still threatens the ontological security of survivors, as demonstrated by the way bereaved individuals "engage with and act on the sacred space of the cemetery to generate customs of memorialization and mourning" (Francis *et al.*, 2001, p. 226). "These flourishing cemetery garden plots and well-washed memorial stones signify that bonds with the deceased do

not end with death, but continue through memory and action” (Francis *et al.*, 2001, p. 235). Such memorializing activity is explored more fully in a recent study of London cemetery behaviour (Francis *et al.*, 2005).

The model of impoverished and over-stark western European disposal takes middle-class, white Anglican funerals as the norm, thus marginalizing working class funerals and those conducted by ethnic minorities. Recent studies of Hindu deathways reflect an increasing rejection of the concept of the other in relation to ethnic communities (Firth, 1997, 2001; Laungani, 1997; Parry, 1994). Howarth (1993, 1996) has demonstrated the persistence of traditional practices at white working-class funerals, although today even middle-class, white Anglican funerals are becoming more personalized with mourners taking a more active part.

Such criticism also neglects the larger historical context within which recent changes can only be fully understood (Houlbrooke, 1989). Social historians have highlighted the impact of two world wars and the importance of taking into account the 9.5 million lives lost in a way that could not be incorporated within the beliefs and practices of nineteenth century life. Winter (1995) links the rise of abstract forms and their austere simplicity to the impossibility of capturing events such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima in symbolic form. Cannadine argues that in view of the “massive, all-pervasive pall of death which hung over Britain in the years between 1914 and 1939” (Cannadine, 1981, p. 230), simpler forms of contemporary death ritual were adopted because they were more bearable.

Bourke describes how the uniformly constructed war cemeteries attempted to console the bereaved by emphasizing the contrast between the world of war and the world of peace (Bourke 1996, p. 227; cited in Hockey, 2001). She suggests that public awareness of bodies deteriorating on the battlefield set the stage for the growing popularity of cremation in the 1950s and 1960s in the name of purity (Bourke, 1996, p. 224). Yet, this understandable and growing tendency towards a more distanced, sanitized, and simplified approach to death ritual has since been problematized. Davies (1996) argues that cremation’s popularity in Britain represents an avoidance of decay in a way that fails to take account of the context of such massive exposure to this aspect of death.

Hockey has identified a current resurgence of Romantic ideology and its privileging of emotionality that challenges the wartime generations’ modernist response to death. This has set the context for the contemporary secularization and diversification of mourning practices in which modernist expertise sits uneasily alongside a postmodern valuing of individual choice (Hockey, 2001, p. 192; Walter, 1994).

Vandendorpe (2000) argues that instead of analysing modern deathways in terms of “disappearance” and “impoverishment” we need to think in terms of “evolution” and “displacement.” Bradbury’s study of current urban deathways reveals a fine balance between tradition and innovation in which “There is symbolism to gather by the armful if we only knew where to look” (Bradbury, 1999, p. 196). Howarth highlights how, in the absence of traditional mourning customs, the bereaved have found new avenues for the public expression of their grief (Howarth, 2001, pp. 247–256). This includes the way the bereaved have

made use of the coroner's inquest to engage in a "ritualized reconstruction of death." Such studies demonstrate how "processes of ritualization are not confined to rigidly demarcated ritual times and spaces" (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 179).

Recontextualizing current deathways

The cultural determinism of earlier studies has given way to a more interactional view of society in which individuals construct and make sense of their world through negotiation with each other. This demands a greater degree of participation on the part of the researcher and "the working out of an ethical orientation to the other-than-onself" (Scheper-Hughes, 1993, p. 24). This has fostered an empathic response to cultural difference that can acknowledge "those small spaces of convergence, recognition and empathy that we do share." Scheper-Hughes was able to explore how mothers could be capable of allowing their babies to die in the context of the life-threatening environment of a shantytown in northeast Brazil. Such behaviour was grounded in assumptions that babies are easily replaceable or some are born wanting to die. In this way the mothers made sense of a situation in which they had little basis for the expectation that their children would survive.

Jonker's study of Greek and Turkish migrant communities in Berlin (1997) shows an appreciation of the issues such communities faced when seeking to dispose of their dead in a way that affirmed their ethnic identity. This includes the way memory structured loss and burial in a foreign environment. In talking with those concerned, she discovered gender differences in the way that death was remembered, the men tending to take on the role of "protector" and the women "transmitter" of cultural values.

Danforth's study of funeral laments in rural Greece presents these not as something distant and exotic but as "a distorted reflection of a familiar image" (Danforth, 1982, p. 7). It emphasizes the active participation of mourners in creating individualized meanings through their laments. Using Van Gennep's tripartite structure, she represents these as continuing conversations with the dead that allowed mourners to gradually move towards an acceptance of their loss and a reorientation towards the living. This highlights the role of conversation as an active, constructive, and creative medium (Danforth, 1982, p. 31).

Redefining ritual

The role of conversation as a reality-sustaining activity has been explored as an aspect of the way that death is ritualized in everyday institutional settings. Sudnow's study (1967), of the way dying is organized in hospital settings, identifies the rules of polite discourse, or "doing talk," in such situations as "breaking the bad news," as a means by which people "demonstrate that grasp over one's self that prevails in the ordinary conduct of daily affairs" (Sudnow, 1967, p. 149). This has produced a wider definition of ritual to reveal aspects of everyday life that have previously been obscured by a focus on the exotic. For

example, Komaromy (2000) has drawn attention to the ritualized performance that takes place in residential and nursing homes when a resident dies, in which the corpse is concealed from sight but not hearing. This enables staff and other residents to manage the boundary between life and death. Hallam and Hockey (2001) have explored how the material objects of everyday life may be used to shape and preserve memories of personal loss.

Turner (1969) has defined ritual as an event which “makes change” and “moves” people through the use of images which are culture specific. This depends not on its external form but on participants’ willingness to submit to the authority represented by ritual specialists. Such a definition encompasses current more personalized and individualized approaches, reflecting the post-modern mistrust of traditional authority (Walter, 1999).

Turner has drawn attention to the way the social order can become more fluid and transformative during the “liminal” phase in which bereaved and deceased are “betwixt and between” normal social roles (Turner, 1969, p. 94). He applies the term “liminoid” to those times, places, and states that run counter to the norm, and are characterized by a loosening of the usual conventions and categories. This includes the experience of “communitas” in which we engage with others on an equal footing. This offers a time of respite and communality that may ease the transition for the bereaved. This has been demonstrated by the way people of Aberfan came together in their grief following the death of their children when a slag heap collapsed and smothered their school in 1966 (Miller, 1974), and the extensive display of spontaneously generated rituals by the entire Liverpool community following the disaster at Hillsborough Football Stadium in 1989 (Walter, 1990, p. 120, 1991).

Turner’s ideas have been applied to the way the modern hospice culture has created dynamic, flexible boundaries for the life–death transition in contrast to their separation by mainstream approaches (Froggat, 1997). This provides a liminal space that encourages the experience of communitas for the dying and bereaved. The value of this would seem to be confirmed by the proliferation of bereavement support groups, which may provide a haven from prevailing expectations. These ‘counter-cultures’ have challenged modernist prescriptions by demonstrating the importance of grief’s sociality (e.g., Cruse Bereavement Care has recently established friendship groups; Small, 2001, p. 115). Such groups have exerted political pressure in relation to death occurring through professional negligence, raised the profile of marginalized groups, and provided validation for the experience of grief (Walter, 1999).

Repositioning death ritual

Seremetakis represents death ritual as “a zone of local resistance to centralizing institutions” (Seremetakis, 1991, p. 14). Her study of the ritualized practices associated with death and divination among the Inner Maniat women of Greece, refers to these as “instruments of cultural power” and “vehicles of resistance” (Seremetakis, 1991, p. 2) that offered the women a creative cultural space for the

performance and articulation of their knowledge and identity (Hallam *et al.*, 1999, p. 197). Small and Hockey (2001, pp. 119–120) cite the aftermath of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, as a dramatic example of such resistance, when the royal family yielded to public and media pressure to change the funeral arrangements and express their grief more publicly (see also Walter, 1999, pp. 150–151).

Skultans' ethnographic study of spiritualist groups in mid-Wales highlights the practice of clairvoyance and the role of such groups in shaping identities and personal relationships in times of crisis. Skultans found that these were largely comprised of housewives who were having difficulties within their marriage and with the traditional female role. Their ritualized communication with the dead served to reinforce their identity by increasing their sense of self-worth within the context of feeling undervalued by society (Skultans, 1974). This is one of the few anthropological studies that have attempted to analyse late twentieth century spiritualist practices in Britain. Rather these have been associated with non-Western "others" (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard and the Azande). This reflects the marginalization of such practices that represent suppressed modes of knowing (Hallam *et al.*, 1999, p. 185). Skultans has shown how these challenge mainstream positivist models of matter and its taken for granted limits and boundaries, especially those which attempt to separate the living and the dead. This suggests that modernist structures are but a thin veneer beneath which lie residual belief systems that challenge common sense boundaries.

Section 3: Sociology

The denial of death

According to Walter "Sociology proceeded until the 1960s as though everyone was male and until the 1980s as though they did not have bodies; it still largely proceeds as though everyone were immortal" (Howarth & Leaman, 2001, p. 421). In Mellor's view (1993, pp. 11–30), this reflects sociology's origins in the Enlightenment project of modernity. Its focus on the promotion of societal progress and individual empowerment cannot accommodate the brute fact of human mortality. Walter (1993) suggests that the way death has become more personalized and individualized may explain the disciplinary spread of research in this area. While psychological studies have formed part of this process, anthropological studies have been able to contribute to modernity's nostalgia for pre-modern deathways.

Yet there are notable exceptions. Durkheim (1915) demonstrated how death and its rituals could be a powerful tool for social integration. His work on suicide illustrated the place of social explanation in an apparently personal decision (Durkheim, 1952). Both Malinowski (1962) and Berger placed death at the heart of social theory, with Berger asserting "Every society is in the last resort men and women banded together in the face of death" (Berger, 1967, p. 51). He describes religious ritual as "a sacred canopy" under which people can shelter from the

terror of mortality. Giddens has similarly emphasized the significance of death for the social construction and maintenance of reality and meaning (Giddens, 1991). Like Berger (1967, p. 23), he highlights the way that “marginal situations” or “fateful moments” (Giddens, 1991, p. 162), in particular death, call into question the socially constructed picture of reality.

The relatively few sociological studies carried out before the 1980s focused mainly on the process by which death has been pushed to the margins of society. This includes a problematizing of contemporary approaches to death in terms of its “denial,” a position that has been challenged for its “oversimplified and reductionist view of the relationship between the individual, society and death” (Kellehear, 1984). According to Gorer (1955), death replaced sex as the contemporary “taboo” to produce a “pornography” of death. American sociologists such as Glaser and Strauss (1965), Sudnow (1967), and Illich (1976) emphasize how medical, psychological, and religious discourses place the individual in a subordinate relationship to the “expert.” Glaser and Strauss identified different “awareness contexts” in relation to how patients come to realize the terminal nature of their condition. Their work has influenced studies in Britain, which have identified a similar situation (Bowling & Cartwright, 1982; Field, 1989; McIntosh, 1977). This has encouraged a shift towards a more open communication between medical staff, patients, and their families, reflecting an increasing dialogue between health practitioners and sociologists.

Humanizing death

Such studies have formed part of a movement towards humanizing death, particularly through their evaluation of hospice practice. Sociological studies have made a significant contribution to the hospice movement’s continuing development, highlighting its positive impact on mainstream medicine as well as the pressures on hospices to operate more like hospitals (Clark, 1993; Hoad, 1991; James & Field, 1991), and the need for “culturally sensitive” services (Gunaratnam, 1997). However, since these studies form part of medical rather than mainstream sociology, they have been driven more by the practical needs of medical practitioners rather than the sociological imagination (Walter, 1993). Their focus has been largely on institutions and carers rather than dying or bereaved individuals.

More recently, Seymour’s ethnographic study of death and dying in an intensive care setting (Seymour, 2001) reveals a shift in emphasis. Drawing on the experiences of patients’ families, doctors, and nurses, Seymour combines interview and observational data to demonstrate the practical, ethical, and emotional challenges faced by all those concerned in this complex setting. In particular, she explores the notion of “natural death” in this highly technological setting and how staff strives to achieve this for dying people and their families. She highlights the tension between vulnerability and control in the companions of the dying who need both guidance as well as recognition of their position and their very individual responses to the prospect of death.

The sequestration of death

In relation to bereavement, its sociological dimension was not really tackled until the late 50s. Though Marris's study (1958) of young widows rested on the prevailing psychological orthodoxy, he did relate the intensity and duration of grief to social factors. However, it was Gorer's work that attempted to "identify the social and cultural implications of a situation—bereavement—which is customarily treated as exclusively or predominantly private and psychological" (Gorer, 1965, pp. vii–viii). Indeed he criticizes the tendency of most previous researchers "to write as though the bereaved were completely alone with no other occupation in life but to come to terms with and work through their grief" (Gorer, 1965, p. 130).

Based on survey and interview data covering a wide range of bereavements and bereaved, Gorer's study is prefaced with an autobiographical account that nostalgically contrasts the "healthy" approach of Gorer's childhood at the turn of the twentieth century with the "unhealthy" mid-century norm. The study was heavily influenced by the "therapeutic discourse" and assumptions about what constitutes healthy and unhealthy grief. Thus he interpreted expressions of "I'll never get over it/forget" in the context of grief as time-limited and therefore as evidence of unhealthy grieving. His central thesis, that the decline in traditional ritual had a negative impact on the grieving process, neglects to consider whether such rituals were actually facilitative or not (Walter, 1998, p. 85).

In spite of such limitations, Gorer's work has stimulated a continuing sociological debate on death and bereavement that has produced a proliferation of sociological studies since the 1980s. Death is no longer "taboo," though there is still a widespread "sequestration" from the public domain (Giddens, 1991). According to Giddens, though modern society has kept death out of public consciousness, it is something that the reflexive late modern self cannot ignore. Indeed such public absence has meant an increased and more intense private presence of death for the individual (Mellor, 1993). For modernity's "reflexivity," its "systematic and critical examination, monitoring and revision of all beliefs and practices in the light of changing circumstances" (Mellor, 1993, p. 17) no longer allows us to rely on modernist, let alone traditional, meta narratives (Walter, 1994). Instead we are thrown back on our own individual resources rather than the community to cope with the threat death poses to our sense of ontological security.

Agency, reflexivity, and meaning-making

Yet, more recent qualitative studies bear witness to the immense resourcefulness and creativity shown by the dying and bereaved in managing and making sense of such potentially shattering experiences in highly individualized ways (e.g., Bradbury, 1999, 2001; Francis *et al.*, 2001, 2005). The increasing recognition of the importance of individual agency has produced a re-evaluation of contemporary professionalized, institutionalized deathways. Bradbury (1999) reports how instead of "a greedy industry, empty rituals, hollow customs and

pathologically grieving customers,” she found “vibrant social customs and vivid accounts of ritual participation”.

A qualitative approach demands a more active and empathic engagement with participants and a greater awareness of the intersubjective nature of findings (Bradbury, 1999; Hockey, 1990; Howarth, 1993). This has highlighted the importance of reflexivity and engaging with ethical issues, especially in relation to loss and grief. This includes its impact on both researchers and participants (Rowling, 1999). Rather than theory testing, more exploratory approaches like “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) have encouraged the development of sensitizing concepts. As noted by Howarth, the increasingly diverse and fragmented nature of current European society “demands that we develop new and complex concepts and approaches that may aid understanding the differentiated experiences of bereaved individuals” (Howarth, 2000, p. 136).

Discourse and narrative

Discursive and narrative approaches, which encourage participants to “tell their stories,” have revealed the variety of ways in which individuals make use of available cultural discourses (Chase, 1995, pp. 1–26). In the context of an experience that can profoundly affect one’s continuity of being, the link between the individual and culture is brought into sharp focus. This includes how competing discourses co-exist (Bennett and Bennett, 2001) and individuals may modify or even reject predominant discourses (Littlewood, 2001). This has highlighted the limitations of a positivist paradigm in reflecting the complex and reflexive relationship between subjective experience and social practice.

Studies of the concept of the “good death” have drawn attention to the way individuals may weave together normative and individual understandings of the world to produce their own version of particular discourses (Bradbury, 1996; Masson, 2002). Though professionals may try to impose the dominant medical discourse on patients and their families, this has been found by Bradbury to be only temporary and the bereaved still manage to come to their own conclusions (Bradbury, 1996). A “flexible realism” has been shown to characterize the way the bereaved take account of the limitations and contingencies of real life (Masson, 2002, pp. 191–209).

As already noted, the use of discursive and narrative approaches has opened up disciplinary boundaries. Thus psychologists have investigated the “self” as a social construction and “how we do” being a person through “discursive practices” (Davies & Harre, 1990). In relation to how we do bereavement, Bradbury (1999) has combined social psychological insights with participant observation. This has demonstrated how grief’s social nature goes beyond the sharing of public and private mourning practices: when a loved one dies, in addition to losing that person, we lose the part of ourselves that was constructed through our interaction with them. This is part of what makes bereavement so painful and disorientating (Bradbury, 1999, p. 176).

The “diversity” of bereavement

Smaller case studies of bereaved individuals and subgroups have highlighted marginalized groups, their resourcefulness as well as their difficulties. This includes an appreciation of individual differences within groups. Wright and Coyle’s study of AIDS-related bereavement among gay men highlights the individual nature of participants’ grief and the diversity of coping styles (Wright & Coyle, 1996). The authors recommend helping individuals to develop their own methods of coping to meet their particular needs rather than giving them prescriptions.

Wertheimer (2001) highlights the social stigma suffered by those bereaved by suicide, as well as the difficulties of making sense of something that “outrages our basic assumptions,” these being the family’s central supportive function, the sanctity of life and the need to preserve it at all costs. A study of families bereaved by murder highlights how their grieving may become obstructed by the needs of the criminal justice system and the intrusion of the media (Riches & Dawson, 1998).

Such studies have been influenced by Doka’s concept of disenfranchised grief, which identifies the special difficulties faced by bereaved individuals whose relationship to the deceased is not publicly recognized or socially sanctioned, their status as mourners remaining unacknowledged (Doka, 1989). The grief of male partners of gay men who died of AIDs has been found to remain unacknowledged by heterosexual friends and the deceased’s immediate family (Wright & Coyle, 1996, pp. 272–273, 278). Friends and neighbours may feel excluded by family and professionals who do not always recognize their role or acknowledge their grief (Young, Seale, & Bury, 1998). This theme is especially relevant to the increasing fragmentation of families due to rising divorce, second marriages, and homosexual partnerships.

Intersubjectivity

Recent sociological studies have further developed the continuing bonds theme. Davies (1996) has highlighted how obituaries in the newspaper are often full of “conversations with the dead” that demonstrate the variety of ways in which they continue to occupy the lives of the living. This may include engaging with others to construct a biographical narrative in order to locate the dead in the life of the living and restore a sense of meaning and continuity (Walter, 1996). It may well entail memorialization and visits to the cemetery as one of the key sites within which an ongoing relationship with the dead may occur (Francis *et al.*, 2001, 2005).

Hallam *et al.* (1999, p. 155) have developed this theme in relation to the way the dead live on in a social as well as an inner sense. Studies of elderly widows reveal the way husbands may continue to exercise agency in their wives’ lives, providing companionship, support, advice, direction, and meaning. This includes experiencing his agency and presence not just in the mind but also via the senses; e.g., the sound of his footsteps (Hallam *et al.*, 1999, p. 158).

Such experiences challenge modernist notions of the bounded body, inhabited exclusively by the self, and of self, agency and body as identical. They highlight the relationship between embodiment and disembodied agency and the mutual dependency of the living and the dead. This calls into question the prioritizing of embodied, face-to-face social interaction that values independence, control, and separateness over intimacy and surrender. It poses a profound challenge to modernist models of society that exclude its dead members. Indeed, it calls for a more far-reaching and encompassing view of human sociality that goes beyond the body and materiality, and beyond dualism, to take account of our inter-subjectivity (Hallam *et al.*, 1999, p. 210).

Conclusions

The psychologizing of grief that has characterized twentieth century academic constructions of bereavement has had an immense impact on understanding and practice. Yet, by excluding the social dimension, this has become increasingly inadequate in addressing the complexity and diversity of our current multicultural Western society. However the twentieth century's last decade has witnessed a fuller engagement with the differentiated experiences of the bereaved by all three disciplines to restore grief's sociality. Most notably this includes the variety of ways in which the bereaved continue to interact with dead loved ones. On the basis of the selected literature this has revealed the way the modernist discourses of "science" and "nature" have obscured grief's "bigger picture" (Small & Hockey, 2001, p. 120).

The modernist critique of current deathways is being replaced by a more "sympathetic" and "inclusive," approach that recognizes "the poetics of loss rather than the logic of theories of loss" (Small, 2001, p. 42). Social historians have contributed to this by supplying a more complex and nuanced historical context, especially one that takes account of the impact of two world wars (Bourke, 1996; Cannadine, 1981; Winter, 1995). This has produced wider applications of certain concepts, for example death as "regenerative" (Bradbury, 1999; Davies, 1996; Francis *et al.*, 2001, 2005), the "good death" (Bradbury, 1999; Masson, 2002), and ritual and "rites of passage" (Froggat, 1997; Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Howarth, 2001; Sudnow, 1967; Turner, 1969). It has encouraged the generation of new concepts, for example "communitas" (Turner, 1969), "disenfranchized grief" (Doka, 1989), and "continuing bonds" (Klass *et al.*, 1996).

Small-scale, reflexive, narrative studies from all three disciplines have attempted to capture the complex, contradictory, ambiguous, fluid, and changing nature of experience (Bradbury, 1996; Masson, 2002; Seymour, 2001). Findings have revealed the complex and creative interplay between individual and cultural resources. This has challenged both individual and cultural determinism and highlighted the importance of individual agency and lay practice. This includes the diversity of mourning practices and styles of grieving characteristic of multi-cultural societies. Such studies have highlighted the resourcefulness of and issues

faced by: marginal groups (Firth, 1997, 2001; Jonker, 1997; Laungani, 1997; Riches & Dawson, 1998; Wright & Coyle, 1996); the co-existence of competing discourses and the way the bereaved may reject prescriptive models (Bennett and Bennett, 2001; Littlewood, 2001); and the processes of meaning-making and identity formation (Jonker, 1997). Attention has been drawn to the resilience of marginalized belief systems (Hallam *et al.*, 1999; Skultans, 1974).

The use of discursive approaches has facilitated the deconstruction of taken for granted categories and boundaries: between life and death, grief and mourning, and self and other. This includes a growing cross-disciplinary debate in which disciplines can draw from each other's insights. It has produced multi-disciplinary studies (Bradbury, 1999; Seymour, 2001) and opened up new areas of inquiry: the continuing relationships people have with their dead (Klass *et al.*, 1996); the ways in which the dead continue to influence the lives of the living (Hallam *et al.*, 1999; Skultans, 1974); how grief is not necessarily time-limited (Littlewood, 2001); the relationship between self-identity and embodiment (Hallam *et al.*, 1999); the rituals of institutional and ordinary life (Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Sudnow, 1967); and the disposal of the deceased's assets (Finch & Wallis, 1993).

An increasing dialogue between sociologists and healthcare professionals has promoted a more "inclusive" approach to policy and practice that seeks to respect and support individual styles of dying and grieving. Though fundamental to hospice ideology, its development and influence on mainstream healthcare is largely due to sociological evaluation of hospice practice. This includes identifying the need for a greater multi-cultural awareness and flexibility on the part of professionals (Gunaratnam, 1997). Studies of minority ethnic groups (Firth, 1997, 2001; Jonker, 1997; Laungani, 1997) have highlighted the issues they face in adapting their traditions to a more secular western context. Studies of stigmatized groups have raised awareness, encouraging a movement away from prescriptive approaches to facilitating individuals to develop their own coping styles (Riches & Dawson, 1998; Wertheimer, 2001; Wright & Coyle, 1996). This includes an appreciation of the bereaved's need for both guidance and control (Seymour, 2001). Mutual self-help groups have proliferated in response to different categories of bereavement and bereaved (Small and Hockey 2001, pp. 115–116).

Challenges to the prevailing orthodoxy are not new, but only recently have dissenting voices gathered sufficient momentum to take us beyond modernity. For the voice of modernism remains strong and persistent, raising questions about its continuing role and the relationship between modern and postmodern paradigms. However, a powerful "dismantling of the boundaries between life and death" (Howarth, 2000) is well underway. If space permitted, additional understanding could be gained by considering how insights from earlier studies are being "rediscovered" in the light of a growing "postmodern" paradigm (Walter, 1994). This is allowing an appreciation of the complex, diverse, and interactional nature of any society, past or present, previously obscured by the rationalizing standardizing discourse of modernity. It is replacing the problematizing and devaluing of current mourning and grieving practices with a fresh look at "our cultural ingenuity" (Bradbury, 2001).

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