Emotions, Grief, and Reality-Unreality in Human Mortality

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Themes of reality and unreality surround death, bereavement and grief. Of particular interest here is the way traditional societies have adopted religious schemes while some sectors of developed societies have approached the emotions of bereavement and grief by encoding them through psychologically and sociologically framed ideas of stages or phases of grief on the one hand, and through a sense of the ongoing links between the living and the dead on the other. In this article, each model offers a contextual means of bringing some identifiable form of ‘reality’ to the ‘unreality’ many have encountered during bereavement.

Life sometimes appears unreal, especially when emotions of grief surround personal bereavement and intensify the widespread fact that being human is, itself, not easy. The major world religions, along with local traditions, have long been the prime means of describing, explaining, and coping with these hardships of life, notably with the fact of death. In doing this religions help manage human emotions, correlating their distinctive ideologies with local cultural categories as they generate dominant accounts of reality and foster ways of coping with intrusions of reality-challenging ideas and experiences. In contemporary worlds many cultures continue to find a supportive sense of reality through such established religious traditions while others find help in secular descriptive-explanations. Furthermore, some people also combine elements of philosophical, medical and social scientific material in perspectives and behaviors described in terms of spirituality or even of worldview.

In this article I take up this theme of reality and unreality surrounding death, bereavement, and grief, in the light of the fact that human emotions have also, quite

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2 Droogers & van Harskamp 2014.
recently, become a focus of scholarly attention in numerous academic disciplines. I pursue this parallel ‘death-studies’ and ‘emotions-studies’ interest because there is relatively little evidence that each engages with the other to any extent, and because each has much to share with the other. Of particular interest here is the way traditional societies have adopted religious schemes while some sectors of developed societies have approached the emotions of bereavement and grief by encoding them through psychologically and sociologically framed ideas of stages or phases of grief on the one hand, and through a sense of the ongoing links between the living and the dead on the other. These latter two approaches are often indicated through the shorthand titles of ‘attachment and loss’ and ‘continuing bonds’. In this article, each model offers a contextual means of bringing some identifiable form of ‘reality’ to the ‘unreality’ many have encountered during bereavement.

### Traditional Approaches

In traditional religious terms, the ideological framing of the emotional sense of reality-unreality has tended to be expressed mythically, theologically, and existentially, with Jewish, Christian and Islamic outlooks employing some idea of divine perfection and human imperfection, including the idea of a ‘fall’. In many Indian-originating traditions, by contrast, the reality-unreality divide is taken up more in terms of illusion. Western and Eastern worlds are similar, however, in linking human identity and its engagement with reality-unreality with ideas of merit and demerit with ‘sin’ as human imperfection manifest in interpersonal, social, and human-divinity relationships being reckoned to influence post-mortem life. The themes of divine judgment with post-mortem rewards in a heavenly paradise or punishment in hell, or of the karmic cycle of transmigration and reincarnation, all use death as a key medium for focusing the fact that life is not easy and yet the way it is lived bears significant consequences. Though secular domains may remove post-mortem fears and, in so doing, radically change an entire facet of historical cultural practice surrounding dying, the dead, and afterlife, life is not made any easier in terms of the emotional dynamics of how we live in relation to each other, to society, and to ourselves. Generalized anxieties of living long and, perhaps, increasingly insignificant lives, in developed societies, combine with a fear of aging, illness, pain and dying, to reveal an uneasy life, even when interpreted in terms of the relatively new use of the term ‘spirituality’. Whether in terms of traditional religions or more recent spiritualities and secularities we encounter ourselves as human animals whose emotional lives are still in the process of cultural evolution.

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3 Davies 2011.
Reality-Unreality, Grief and Emotion

In terms of grief, Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* brought with it not simply a medicalized narrative of loss of an attachment figure and the necessity of working towards a freedom from that limiting attachment, but also the evident theme of a person's sense of reality being shaken, tested, and reformed. A similar 'reality' factor appeared in the 'loss of contact with reality' spoken of by Peter Marris and which influenced Geoffrey Gorer. Touched both by his own experience of bereavement and by his anthropological commitment, Gorer, whose work was much concerned with emotion, not least by "the British fear of the display of emotion", engaged with grief in terms of a "stage-approach". His anthropological background probably helped him frame this scheme as one focused on mourning as a socially embedded factor rather than on grief as a more psychological feature. Indeed, his mourning stages are replete with emotional forces with his stage one consisting of an "initial period of shock", followed by "violent grief and disorganization" (of about six to twelve weeks in Britain), and a final "longer period of reorganization". He notes the importance of ritual in all this and finally emphasizes the importance of other people during the first two stages of response, and of the problems that might ensue if their help is not forthcoming. Gorer was keenly alert to the fact that his own research dealt with ordinary life contexts, whereas most others in his day possessed a specifically medical or hospital context.

Also in 1965, Glaser and Strauss published their *Awareness of Dying*, which revealed just such hospital-related fieldwork results in San Francisco. Analyzing the mode of interaction between medical staff, dying patients, and families, they highlighted a 'theory of awareness' focused on the 'awareness context' of hospitals, pinpointing four types of 'awareness contexts'. This 'awareness' motif typifies one form of that sense of reality-unreality over grief underlying this article. They arranged 'awareness contexts' in four ways: (a) Closed awareness: the patient does not know he is dying, everyone else does. The "Family cannot express their grief openly to the dying person". (b) Suspected awareness: the patient suspects that others know and tries to confirm or deny it. (c) Mutual pretence awareness: all define the patient as dying but pretend others do not. (d) Open awareness: all know that death is impending and act on that basis. In the 'closed awareness' context, Glaser and Strauss speak of 'Stages of Grieving' within a single family, with individuals capable of being at different stages of grieving because each member may form a different kind of death expectation, or may be brought into awareness at a different

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4 Freud 1917.
5 Gorer 1965, 127.
6 Ibid., 18.
7 Glaser & Strauss 2005 (1965), 11; See also their *Time for Dying* 2007 (1968).
8 Ibid., 44.
time, or may require more or less time for grieving. Some may spend more time with the patient, which stimulates more grieving. Usually a very close relative is ‘ahead’ of the others.\footnote{Ibid., 173.} They even speak of someone who has been much with the patient as having ‘finished grieving as well’, but note that ‘status forcing’ may occur if a relative arrives and is overcome with grief, which necessitates others having to respond in a similar fashion. They observe that, “When lingering is very prolonged, family members may finish grieving before the patient is dead ... may begin to wish the patient was dead.” Similarly, “Nurses may also grieve for their patients, though they may reserve emotional outbursts for later, private occasions.”\footnote{Ibid., 74.}

Even better known than Glaser and Strauss, certainly on the popular front, is Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s work. This, too, is grounded in accounts of emotions and, in a distinctive fashion, also engages with a sense of reality over the news of one’s own impending death in (a) denial and isolation, (b) anger, (c) bargaining, (d) depression, (e) acceptance.\footnote{Kübler-Ross 1989 (1969).} One of her enduringly significant points lies in the highlighting of ‘hope’ in relation to a sense of mortality, and I particularly want to identify that idea of ‘hope’ as one existential process engaging with a sense of reality and unreality over death.

A much more explicit account of the reality-unreality theme emerged more recently with Colin Murray Parkes and his Love and Loss, where he developed the notion of ‘the assumptive world’ through his work on amputees and their sense of loss of a limb.\footnote{Parkes 2006.} Though this approach resembles the idea of the sociological phenomenologists and their concept of the ‘everyday life-world’ his assumptive world is not rooted in that tradition but in a more ordinary sense of taking the world for granted. Just as someone who loses a limb has to come to accept a different sense of assumptions about the world so, too, with a bereaved person. This approach dovetails with studies about narratives in life and the stories we create to make our lives intelligible. For Parkes, appropriate changes at bereavement are important as we come to live in a differently organized world: it needs to be one that corresponds to ‘reality’ and not to a fantasy. Accordingly, he argues for an integration of attachment theories with psycho-social theories in a Dual Process Model as advocated by Stroebe and Schut in 2001. This suggests that bereaved people tend to oscillate between ‘loss orientation’ (search for the dead person) and ‘restoration orientation’.\footnote{Ibid., 35.} In other words, it argues for an accommodation to a sense of reality achieved through the events of bereavement. Part of this accommodation involves the ‘loss orientation’ realizing that the memory of the dead remains with us and, in that sense, all is not lost. It is here that what has come to be called the
‘continuing bonds’ approach becomes significant. These bonds involve emotions evoked by memories of events, by the material culture of deceased people, and even by aspects of our own bodies and behavior that seem to reflect the same things in those we have loved.\textsuperscript{14} In all of this, emotions are frequently embedded in narratives or stories.

Here, narrative theory in its many forms may find a place. I am reminded, for example, of the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s interest in stories. As he says, “Stories do not, as a rule, come with their meanings already attached, nor do they mean the same for different people.”\textsuperscript{15} For him, the sense of human life is focused upon the individual as a ‘wayfarer’, one who travels along lines of experience, encounters knots, or we might say clusters, of intensified experience and who experiences life as a mesh of many interlinked lines of other people’s experience. This is a view open for application to grief and emotion and, not least, to an engagement with the reality-unreality dimensions of life encountered as we exist in transit between different life situations. Ultimately, all situations and relationships embedded in them reveal deep individual significance and signification of emotions framing a sense of the reality and unreality of the dead. Christine Valentine’s reported conversations with bereaved people has done much, for example, to furnish evidence for this complexity, and enhances our knowledge of ‘continuing bonds’, as well as prompting serious criticism of over-easy social theories of modernism, post-modernism and the like.\textsuperscript{16}

Also from a more directly sociological perspective Clive Seale’s \textit{Constructing Death}, itself offers an excellent study of grief as a dynamic field in which adaptation to a sense of reality involves an approach to grief that takes “grief to be but an extreme version of an everyday experience of ‘grief’ which is routinely worked upon in order to turn the psyche away from awareness of Mortality and continuation in life.”\textsuperscript{17} In connection with this Seale takes the traditional religious idea of resurrection and secularizes it to speak of resurrective practices as “a resurrection of hope in survivors about continuing in life”.\textsuperscript{18} Here, as in Kübler-Ross, ‘hope’ becomes a prime element of his study, which conceives of society as a move towards a relatively ‘grief-free’ society, especially when considering the death of old people.

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14 Young 2002.
15 Ingold 2011, 62.
16 Valentine 2008, 74.
17 Seale 1998, 211.
18 Ibid., 194.
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Grief and Emotional Dynamics

It is, at this point, obvious that theories of grief and theories of emotion both relate to theories of the self and of the relationship between self and society, itself the key problem of the humanities as it is of the social sciences. And it is so because of the ‘sense of reality of things’ in which the emotional dynamics of existence correlate with our cognitive patterning of things. Here it is worth recalling Clifford Geertz’s cultural definition of religion, itself often criticized on the basis that it might, equally well, be the definition of culture at large but which, in our context, benefits from that very criticism given the way it frames aspects of life. His definition runs thus:

Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivation by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that these moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.19

Here we encounter a strong emphasis not only upon an ‘aura of factuality’ but also upon the seemingly uniquely realistic moods and motivations that pervade our sense of the order of things. While such a descriptive definition is valuable in the analysis of many systems of symbols, not least those often described as religious, it is also instructive in terms of bereavement and the experiences of grief that often pervade it. This definition has the identity of individuals and groups at its implicit core, for it concerns the implicit meaningfulness of life and the ritual-symbolic processes that sustain it.

Another thinker, this time a historian rather than an anthropologist of religion, who helps us generate a reality-unreality perspective about mortality is Ernesto de Martino, whose goal lay in describing a pervading mood of ‘reality’ in life at large. Indeed when Paul White20 wrote the Preface to one of de Martino’s works he does so by quoting Eugene Ionesco, “There is no such thing as unreality; there are only various forms of reality.” In pursuing de Martino’s exploration of forms of reality, especially as they are present through a theory of ‘presence’, Fabrizio M. Ferrari21 has done much to introduce de Martino to an English readership. De Martino sees the human body as the arena within which meaning is pursued, not least at times of crisis, including that of bereavement. Though many might dislike de Martino’s apparent and Freud-like medicalization of death, as when he says that “the crisis of grief is a disease (malattia) and grief is the work done to try and get healed”,22 they might also applaud his affirmation that “the deceased is transformed in a bond”,

21 Ferrari 2012.
with ritual “nurturing such a bond” and allowing the living to “overcome the crisis”
that death brings to our sense of presence or sense of identity and placement in
life. What is evident is that the reality-unreality factor underlies de Martino’s deep
concern with the dead and the way our experience of grief brings the issue of the
ongoing nature of ordinary life into a form of crisis in which ritual events and a form
of ritual time take us out of that ordinary flow for a period of existential orientation or
reorientation. Within this grammar of discourse the reality-unreality idiom appears
as an opposition between a sense of presence and a crisis of presence. In applying
his scheme to bereavement, grief can be described as a ‘crisis of presence’, a
concept not far removed from what Durkheim would identify as anomie, and which
he linked with one form of suicide.

A Philosophical Reality-Check

At this point it is worth drawing attention to a philosophical warning that ought,
perhaps, to be recalled when pondering the theme of ‘reality’ and ‘unreality’ in
grief’s impact on the life-world. I take it from that Western philosophical background
expressed in Martin Heidegger’s valuable warning in Being and Time, where he
speaks of “the every-day state of mind which consists in an air of superiority with
regard to the certain ‘fact’ of death, a superiority which is ‘anxiously’ concerned
while seemingly free from anxiety.”

When academics gather to discuss death it is, perhaps, especially easy to
adopt that ‘air of superiority’ that may pose as an anxious concern while actually
being devoid of any real anxiety. Having said that, it seems to me that it is also
possible to overplay the role of death awareness. For, accepting, as I do, the value
of descriptive phenomenology of the life-world in the tradition of Husserl and its
sociological direction in Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, the
variety of tensions of consciousness that exist in us across the numerous universes
of meaning that we inhabit during a night’s sleep, a day, week, or year, or the
life-course, allows for times of anxiety about dying, death, as well as for times of
forgetfulness about them. In other words, while the theme of reality-unreality can
be discussed in terms of logical argument, our experience of ‘it’ belongs to the
natural process of life-contexts.

23 Ibid., 116–7.
24 Durkheim 1966 (1897).
25 Heidegger 1962 (1927), 302; Section II.1.258.
Interestedness-Disinterestedness

Within this variability, our concern in this paper lies primarily upon grief when our life-attention dwells within and upon death. Decrease of interest in the world at large, and a focusing upon our individual feelings and thoughts, can prompt a sense of the unreality of things going on around us. For its own reasons, the center of gravity of self withdraws from its normal wider social networks, whether for rest, survival or the simple fact of shocked amazement at the changed state in which we find ourselves. Here we hear echoes of behavior associated for some with a sensed response to news of their own impending death. That itself is a reminder of Heidegger’s further point that ‘everyday Being-towards-death’ evades the ‘indefiniteness’ of its ‘when’. At the heart of this issue stands the option of mindfulness and forgetfulness of death, and of the emotional patterns that foster these states in terms of the reality-unreality theme. Here there are echoes of Zygmunt Baumann and the task of society in hiding the terminal nature of death from its members lest they despair.

Indeed the very question of the central or peripheral nature of death in safe societies is a question all of its own, one that I only mention here rather than discuss. Certainly, some people would like us to dwell a great deal on issues concerning death while others prefer to see death-issues as best left marginal to life, to be pondered only when necessary.

Cultural Background

Whether we have freedom to adopt one or other or some combination of these options depends to an extent on our wider social worlds, an issue I would like to exemplify for the UK, itself a most complex and internally divided society. I do this because many studies of grief, though much less so of emotion, often focus on the individual or perhaps the family in grief while ignoring the cultural world of values and emotions that frame them. I stress this because of British practices surrounding the period of Remembrance Day and Remembrance Sunday that occur, respectively, on November 11th and its associated Sunday each year, events that attract much media interest, discussion, and popular involvement. The cultural grasp of such events is important. For example, one of my recent Finnish visiting students thought that the red paper poppy flowers worn by millions of Britons at this time were a symbol of what many Britons probably regard as the rather extremist British Nationalist Party, and was amazed to discover from most of her fellow students, all wearing poppies, that nothing was further from the truth.

27 Ibid.
This UK time of remembrance and emotion is rooted in the Great War of 1914–18, the Second World War of 1939–45, reinforced by the Falklands War of 1982 and subsequent wars in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. At 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month of the year millions of people stop work for two minutes of silence. This now happens in city and town centers across the land, and is marked in cathedrals and workplaces. This expresses the hour and day in 1918 when the guns fell silent and the Great War ended. This act of remembrance has become stronger in recent years than it has been for some time. On Saturday night a major act of remembrance including celebrity entertainment, military elements and a religious service is held in London’s Royal Albert Hall and broadcast on primetime BBC television with practically the entire Royal Family present. On Sunday morning thousands of acts of remembrance take place in churches and at public war memorials across the UK, especially at the Cenotaph in London’s Whitehall public space, where wreaths are laid on this empty tomb built after the First World War and which, in a strange symbolic fashion, parallels the tomb in Westminster Abbey occupied by the Unknown Warrior. For weeks people wear red poppies bought in support of the British Legion, the group of ex-servicemen and women who care for injured soldiers and their families.

At the core of each of these events is silence: the greatest symbol of death-focused remembrance in Britain, and one that, in some complex symbolic way, expresses both the reality and unreality of social life. I highlight these events because, in many ways, they provide the dominant motif of emotion and grief in Britain, and I emphasize that the word ‘remembrance’ underlies all these events. The power of nationally-focused memory is integral, it seems to me, to national identity. To speak of the emotion of remembrance is important here where a sense of pride combines with gratitude to the dead. Jon Davies of Newcastle University has written of the war memorials across Britain and of the ‘greater love’ motif taken from St John’s Gospel – ‘greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’ – as one that transformed the image of the ordinary soldier and linked him with the death of Jesus. Here, then, I think we have a powerful set of symbols that unite ideas and emotions in a very focused and national way. Indeed, the way that formal ceremonial and forms of entertainment combine to stimulate emotion is enormous in these events. The power of all this sentiment was evident in November 2011 when the international football authority intended to prevent the English football team from wearing a poppy on their kit when playing Spain as part of their general policy of avoiding political and religious symbols on sports kit. This was taken by many in the UK as a foolish act of silly authorities and


30 This could be extensively explored through the ‘fourth obligation’ motif of Marcel Mauss’s theory of reciprocity (The Gift), as well in the much more recent account of the gift-object taking the form of the dead soldier (cf. Marilyn Marvin & David Ingle (1999) and also Jean Baudrillard (1993)).

31 Davies 1995.
was soon changed in a suitably compromised form after both Prince William and the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, wrote to Sepp Blatter the FIFA president whose committee swiftly agreed that the poppy symbol could be worn on players’ armbands. Here, the newspapers played a powerful role in expressing the thoughts and feelings of many with the very popular UK paper The Sun carrying the headline “Prince William forces FIFA Climbdown on Wearing a Poppy.” More than any other regular national and international phenomenon football has come to be a kind of ceremonial arena of sentiment, not least in terms of the deaths of sport-related individuals. I stress this because, in Britain, we should not think of grief simply in terms of individuals or families but also at a corporate level. It is precisely this kind of national sense of identity – not least as focused in and associated with the Royal Family and related to dead and corporate remembrance that provided part of the background to such events as the death of Diana Princess of Wales in 1997. In fact, one of the most complex theoretical issues that we could raise is the relationship between such a nationwide period of remembrance and the nature of grief at the family level. It is interesting, for example, that the Christian liturgical marking of what we might call the ‘church dead’ in All Souls–All Saints Days in the UK is minimally significant and is entirely overshadowed by the ‘state dead’.

**Challenging Unreality**

My own first attempt at dealing with grief and human mortality in my book *Death, Ritual and Belief*, first published in 1997, sought the larger social canvass as the matrix for grief at a more individual level. There I used the expression ‘words against death’ to summarize a speculative theory arguing that death brought a challenge to the self-conscious awareness of the human animal, a challenge that was met through language, itself a prime medium of self-consciousness. I argued that funeral rites were the medium for these ‘words against death’ and that having encountered and survived the death of members of their society, humans were transformed and strengthened for survival in the world. This made funeral rites the adaptive behavior triggered by the challenge of death, a challenge accepted and overcome in and through the social behavior of human beings. Such ‘words against death’ are also, of course, emotion-laden words that challenge the sense of unreality sometimes encountered in grief. They address the anxiety and fear that the challenge of destruction brings to people, whether in the death of oneself or in the anxiety of anticipated loneliness following bereavement. In theoretical terms I would like to link this perspective with another topic I explored in a 1984 publication dealing with the combined themes of the sociology of knowledge and embodiment, viz., the question of how the drive for meaning comes to take the form of a need for
salvation. This is not an idea that we often discuss in relation to grief but it can play a valuable role in that context because the theme of salvation that underlies many religious traditions is often deeply involved with emotions surrounding death. But it is also allied with one emotional complex already mentioned above and which, we might argue, pervades these very religions and concepts of salvation, that of hope.

**Hope**

In the human animal, the emotional phenomenon of hope is one that captures this feeling of survival in some anticipated future. Certainly within the broad Christian tradition, and possibly in other major religions, hope might almost be said to be the prime cultural phenomenon that bridges the experiential themes of reality and unreality or of unreality and reality. By this I mean that hope is a concept that captures the human desire to see beyond any immediate present, not least those contexts of dreadful negativity, into a more positive future. This is not to say that individuals may find themselves in a situation of despair when hope is absent and when, quite intentionally, other people, usually enemies, seek to impose hopelessness upon them. Indeed, victim-hood reveals one kind of exception that proves the rule, for torture works either to destroy hope or to intensify it in the desire for escape from pain. The very fact of torture highlights human awareness of the power of hope and despair in contexts of pain. In the far more common and less culturally pathological realm of ‘ordinary’ bereavement an individual may experience moments of despair but does so in contexts of social support, where sustenance and encouragement are provided until such time as hope is restored.

Some social scientific and cultural studies colleagues will, doubtless, criticize this rather universalizing use of the notion of hope, and that is fair enough. Still the challenge for them would be to document in ethnographic detail just how the human meaning-seeking animal copes with situations which trigger emotion-flooded awareness of life’s quandaries in ways that would not relate to ‘hope’. Nevertheless, even in Western contexts, it is interesting that hope is one of those words that does not appear in any simple way in the lists of emotions various psychologists offer as somehow basic to universal human nature. It is absent in Paul Ekman’s list of happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise, anger. We might find it, perhaps, in Robert Plutchik’s ‘expectation’: perhaps, ‘expectation’ combined with either ‘joy’ or ‘surprise’. Or, again, perhaps in Nico Frijda’s ‘desire’ combined with ‘enjoyment’.

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34 Davies 1984.
35 Ekman 1965.
37 Frijda 1986.
Numerous other combinations might be suggested. The point is that, from a biocultural approach to emotions, one that takes aspects of our bodily responses in deep association with cultural learning, there is often a future-directed positive-dynamic to a sense of identity. This is precisely where hope is associated with ritual performance as indicated some time ago by William Robertson Smith, whose work deeply influenced Durkheim's sociology of religion. Sometimes this hope is focused on the survival of one's children and descendants, especially in cultures where ancestors play a significant role in framing society at large. Sometimes it focuses on the survival of the self in its ongoing and transforming identities as in Christianity, Islam, and the Indian family of karmic-samsaric traditions. In a very mixed society, such as that of the UK just now, it is also necessary to consider if and how 'hope' works for those claiming neither any interest in an afterlife nor in any ancestor-like domain.

Narrative, Hope and Despair

What is more, hope is embedded within the narrative of people's lives. There is often a period in life, perhaps associated with illness and often with grief, when the future seems uncertain, when the major constraint lying upon life is the sense of lack of purpose and meaning that prompt a sense of unreality. For a few this may lead to a negative valuation of self and life and to a life-narrative that the individual reads as best ending in suicide. However, for the great majority, and as a result of some trigger or another, hope is restored, and the future seems possible again, a life-narrative resumes its sense of dynamism or vitality. This is, in one sense, a form of salvation or deliverance from a vortex of negativity.

Here the work of the Oxford experimental psychologist Edmund Rolls is useful. First he is useful when he moves from hard experimental data to the more speculative accounts of how and why humans enjoy and engage in narratives and take an interest in the stories of other people's lives, because the events and causalities lying behind them are also applicable to their own lives. Stories help us understand our own emotional situation and, as such, possess an adaptive value. Moreover, if it is the case, as some significant evidence suggests, that our cognitive capacities may influence the dynamics of our emotional lives, then narratives of 'words against death' become powerful forces in the management of emotion, not least of fear and its attendant sense of unreality. Again following Rolls and the way he thinks of tracing emotions along an axis or spectrum from negative through a

38 It does appear in Solomon (1993, 276), but even he acknowledges that he says "so little about love".
40 Durkheim 1976 (1912).
41 Rolls 2005.
neutral point into positive directions, one might describe aspects of grief in terms of
the direction of flow of feeling from fear, through anxiety into anticipation and hope
or, in yet other terms, from unreality to reality. When such emotional feelings in an
individual's narrative are paralleled with the emotions of a larger narrative then the
individual's position may be enhanced. This is evident, for example, in Christianity's
use of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Churches describe Christ's
agony of obedience, his sweating as though it were blood, his betrayal with a kiss,
his abandonment, trial, crucifixion and on into his mysterious encounters with
disciples before his final absence that left behind a dramatic community of hope.
To live within this theology, to participate in this mythology's emotional gestalt, is to
have the opportunity of relating one's self to a grand narrative.

Elective Affinity

Here, the very notion of 'elective affinity' becomes powerfully relevant. Let me
remind ourselves of that idea in which one element, thing or person is attracted
towards another. Max Weber used it, for example, to describe the attraction of
people towards certain ideas as, for example, when describing how the 'salvation'
appropriate for soldiers differs from that needed by shopkeepers etc. But
Weber took the idea from Goethe's novel of the same term, with Goethe, in
turn, borrowing the idea from Swedish chemist Torbern Bergman's 1775 work on
this topic. My point is this: people have been attracted to the life, passion, and
defath of Jesus, just as I think many have been attracted to the very idea of the
incarnation, because they see something of their own life in it, not least, I suggest,
in the incarnation. For there is a mystery about that story of a divine-human person
just as, for self-reflective individuals, there is a mystery of the self to the self. To
encounter these issues in the great narratives of life enhances the very practice
of self-awareness and, indeed, for millions, the phenomenon of human mortality
has been transcended through the Christian gospel story (and I could argue much
the same for a variety of other traditions), from its spectrum of emotions, from the
spear that would pierce his future mother's heart to the sorrow that was 'like unto
his sorrow', and to the 'peace be with you' in the words of the resurrected Christ.
So, from the grief of the Annunciation to the Stabat Mater theme, from Christ's
betrayal to the joy of resurrection, individual emotions have found affinities with the
emotions of the Christian past to sustain many a sorrowing mother and disciple
across the centuries. If gospel narratives have had, and in many parts of the world
still have, such power, then secularization can be understood as the absence of
the narratives or, perhaps even more importantly, an environment in which there
is no affinity with them. The absence of an elective affinity with the passion and

42 Weber 1965 (1922).
43 Goethe 1971 (1802).
resurrection of Christ will certainly have many causes, one might be an absence of a sense of self-wonder, another may be because of an alternative affinity, one such I will describe in a moment.

**Demystified Self and Grief**

The theoretical issue that interests me here is with the self as a mystified or demystified phenomenon in relation to bereavement, death, and their associated emotional patterns. Potential factors here are enormous, from individual tendencies to banality, to lack of creativity, to industrialization and beyond. Let me approach this immense philosophical, theological, social and psychological issue through one detailed topic within grief and bereavement, viz., the experience of the presence of the dead. In our researches, already published in 1995 for example, we found that 35% of the British public in a well-structured sample of 1600 people experienced a sense of the presence of the dead after they have died. People may not discuss this very widely, it may even be perceived as a strange phenomenon. Yet, this can be an influential experience, one that may raise explicit questions about the nature of reality, of the relationship between the world of daily life and some afterlife world. It may also influence that aspect of life associated more with our sense of embodiment at large in which experience accumulates and influences a life-time of awareness. Such an experience offers two directions of analysis, the first belonging to rational considerations and formal learning, and the second to symbolic knowledge that we simply acquire. To go back to our sample we find that, in terms of reported emotion, people spoke positively of their experience. Though they may have been surprised they were not afraid. They were largely life-affirming emotions, notably so when they came to people at times of crisis in their own lives. One of the most interesting features of these experiences was that women reported them more than did men. So, for example, of those saying they had such experiences ‘occasionally’, ‘rarely’, or ‘only once’ the division was between 65% women and 34% men. As for those who said they had such experiences ‘often’ the difference was 83% women and 17% men. The female-male profile in our total sample was 54% women to 46% men (that differed slightly from the national UK profile at that time which had 51% females to 49% males). Allowing for the fact that husbands tend to die before their wives, this difference remains considerable. Still, we should not forget that the great majority of persons in this particular study, some 1,011 individuals or 63% of the total group, did not report experiences of the dead.

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44 Here I echo the distinction between symbolic and encyclopedic forms of knowing as in Dan Sperber (1975).


46 Davies & Shaw 1995, 96.
Table 1. Presence of dead

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presence of Dead</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Women %</th>
<th>Men %</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the identity of the presence most often recognized, it was of a parent or a spouse, those with whom the person had had a great deal of social contact and who had contributed to their sense of identity. The majority of contexts of experience were domestic (46% at home: 9% at a friend or relative’s house: 1.4% driving a car).

Quite significantly, I think, only 3 individuals out of the 1,603 (0.19%) or a half a percent (0.53%) of those saying they had experience of the dead after they died, reported such a presence at the actual funeral of someone. This suggests to me that the social event of a funeral presents a different kind of emotional arena than does the solitude of the domestic arena following a funeral. This is also a suggestive fact in terms of the variation of emotional experiences in relation to ritual events.

One might also argue that belief in some form of life after death is evidence of a degree of mystification of life. On that front our research showed a similar marked division between women and men, with approximately 60% women holding some kind of afterlife idea with 23% ‘not knowing’, and 38% of men holding an afterlife belief and 24% ‘not knowing’. In terms of those prepared to say they did not believe in an afterlife of any form we had 17% of women and 37% of men: again a marked difference.

**Demystification**

The point I want to suggest is that afterlife options and the option of ‘not knowing’ can be counted together in terms of a mystification of life, while the not believing group is probably more of a demystified group. I do, of course, appreciate that one might interpret this material in quite a different way and argue that those who think that death is the end can, because of that, see life as far more mysterious than religious people who have a firm idea of what will happen to them.

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49 Ibid.
But here we must be careful, because direct categories often provide deceptive descriptions and interpretations of life. There is some truth, for example, in the fact that ordinary life and its daily routines may easily create a sense of banality, a factor which I think is likely to be a greater influence in secularization than any formal scientific or other theory on the nature of life. In other words, people simply live their lives within an ordinariness of things that has little place for formal religion or science. But, other moments, such as the birth of children for example, can give a deep sense of significance that disturbs ordinariness and banality.

**Remystification**

Indeed, life is remarkably dynamic and we may never know what will happen next, and it is here that I want to suggest one context at least in which a kind of remystification takes place. I come to it from research on woodland or ecological burial. This relatively new development in the UK often leads to people speaking of wanting to have their bodies buried in woodland areas and they speak of how they will become part of the environment. Some relatives also speak of their buried kin as somehow being able to see or appreciate the beauty of the place, of being able to see in a certain direction, or appreciate the plants. Here emotional ideas of peace and some sense of fulfilment by giving oneself back to nature are common. This discourse offers a degree of a re-mystified self. It is a process encouraged by the values already associated with nature, with plant and animal life, and which become enhanced by a new imaginative association with one’s status after death. An imaginative link is forged between the living self considering its own death and the fully acknowledged ongoing and surviving character of plants and animals. I will be part of them and they will frame my future identity. When this idea is, itself, enhanced by extensive social ideas of ecology, an opportunity is provided for a kind of enhanced or even demystified sense of self. I have described this as a form of ecological hope: in other words, the narrative of the self is merged with the grand narrative of ecology and nature to bring a validation to the self and a legitimating of the form of death ritual.50

Still, for many others, and I suspect it is a growing number, death does demystify the self. Here I return to the issue of hope to link it with the theme of secularization. For once the self is demystified, as for example in not believing it has gone to some afterlife or is involved in notions of merit and divine judgement, an opportunity arises to evaluate or re-evaluate the person concerned in more direct ways. And this we see happening in the rise of funeral and memorial events led not by priests but by civil or secular celebrants in the UK, or with family and friends playing a leading role in the rites whose focus is on the life that was lived: here people speak of life-centered or celebrated events. The emotions evoked are emotions of

50 Davies 2005.
memories of what the person was and did. I have also described this kind of activity in respect of what we began to do with cremated remains from the mid-1970s, taking and placing them in all sorts of places that symbolize aspects of the identity of the dead. This I described as the retrospective fulfilment of identity as opposed to the eschatological fulfilment of identity that underlies the liturgies and evoked emotions of traditional Christian liturgy.

But, the emotions surrounding bereavement, and the strangeness that can be associated with the sense of shock or of unreality in the bereaved compared with the apparent ordinariness of lifestyle of those carrying on with daily activities ‘as normal’, needs some explanation if the demystified model holds any reality. For whatever grief is, it involves an awareness of a distinctive emotional change within a bereaved person. In other words, the loss of a significant-other renders a change in the emotional dynamics of the survivor. Following the demystified path, I think it is here that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s theory became important and widely accepted. Indeed, many seemed to feel a deep elective affinity with it for, despite any cautions over its application, many bereaved people found its formula helpful. Here was a stage-theory of grief that could replace a sense of a mystified self. The formula accounted for the emotional ‘shift’ out of and back into ‘reality’.

From Stages to Bonds

Following the largely medical-psychiatric domains of Freud, Bowlby and others who approached grief through ideas of attachment to the living and detachment from them when dead, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s work touched a wider social base. Its success lay, in part, in the fact that it brought a sense of order to the disorder of grief. Here we are back with Geertz’s definition of religion with its assertion of “a general order of existence” pervaded by a mood of reality. Her theory, it seems to me, arrived at a time of growth of middle-class groups much less familiar with death and dying than were previous generations. Depending on how we might want to describe this, they were deskilled in bereavement or alienated from death and the dead and it is likely that this generated a degree of anxiety about, and perhaps intensified a fear of death. It also touched an uneasiness grounded in the fact that there was an area of life in which they were lacking experience and knowledge. Yet this very group within society was increasingly characterized as one alert to and knowledgeable about many things; more highly educated, and economically secure, they experienced a relatively high degree of control over their way of life. The arrival of a bundle of knowledge – a theory – from one deeply involved in working with dying patients offered easy access to knowledge and a sense of gaining control within their social life-world. In other words, such groups possessed an affinity for this stage theory because it offered something easy to grasp, even if

it meant that Kübler-Ross’s material, at first derived from those who were terminally ill, became transposed to apply to bereaved people. In practice it also became increasingly simplified as stages to be experienced and gone through. It was the fact of an accessible theory more than any subtlety of content that made it popular, and continues to make it popular amongst some people. To have an intelligible theory offered a sense of control. Here we have a social context in which lack of knowledge about death easily fostered emotions and moods of ignorance and therefore of anxiety and fear. Against this there appeared a theory of grief that could assuage that anxiety.

### Grief Unique?

But now we encounter a telling paradox, viz., that the kind of people who found refuge in a single theory were also the kind of people who, increasingly, came to speak of the individual nature of grief, indeed we might even say of the ‘uniqueness of individual grief’. So here we have the paradox of an acceptance of a unified theory that would suggest a uniformity amongst people who, at the same time, preferred to think of grief as individually unique. This ‘unique-grief’ approach, in its turn, raises the fundamental issue of whether emotion is not also unique? While unique emotions is a concept we might debate for some time it is to some detailed issues of cultural context that I draw attention here through one model of differences between middle and working class people in England. Let me be bold, however, and discuss the theoretical dynamics of this view in such a way as to make it open for analysis in other cultures too.

The theorist from whom I take this, the educational sociologist Basil Bernstein, has not been much in favor for many years yet he deeply influenced Mary Douglas’s anthropological studies, which many continue to find invaluable. Bernstein described two types of social groups in terms of what he called the linguistic codes that could be identified within their forms of language and interpersonal behavior.\(^5\) The restricted code, one often used in working class groups he studied, adopted forms of speech that bound people together in shared group values. In such traditional groups the individual was subservient to the community; personal opinion gave way to what the group thought and wanted, and especially to conventional ways of doing things. The individual did not want to ‘stick his neck out’ and be notably different from his family, friends, or other workers. Children were taught to respect authority and obey their elders. The elaborated code, by contrast, much deployed by more middle class groups, encouraged individual opinion and differentiation from other people. Children were taught to have a view of their own, and to display their individuality as its own virtue.

\(^5\) Bernstein 2003.
Bernstein had argued that these elaborated code users were at a real advantage in the kind of education system developing in the UK, while the restricted code users were at a disadvantage. Some thought he meant that working class life was ‘restricted’, or worse in some way than middle class life, but that was not the point. Mary Douglas, however, did see Bernstein’s point and reflected it in her ideas of the purity rule and of ideas of grid and group as means of controlling how people might think and act. In her scheme working class children would have a relatively high degree of grid and group factors, while middle class types would be lower on grid and group. Of course, these are complex issues and many qualifications would need to be made if we were to explore these ideas at length. The point I want to make here, however, is to ask whether grief is likely to be shaped by restricted and elaborated code-styles? My hypothesis is that restricted code contexts would foster a uniformity over expectations of grief while elaborated code contexts would favor individuality over expectations of grief. What is more, I would argue the same for ritual practice: restricted code contexts would favor ‘tradition’ while elaborated codes would favor innovation and, indeed, it is just such innovation that we are beginning to find in the negotiated ritual performances in British funerals, not least in the UK innovation of woodland burial.

The account I have given here, albeit in terms of ideal-types, is of a two-fold middle class response to death in Britain. First, a sensed need of a view of grief to replace an alienated partial ignorance, and then, second, a shift towards individuality of expression of grief now covered by an apparently theoretical view of grief’s individuality. Another way of describing this situation is one in which a sense of reality is sought through a medicalized theory and is then brought to bear on the sense of unreality increasingly associated with death in safe, developed, societies. With increased research and developments in death-studies further advances have been made, for example, in the rise of narrative theory, as evidenced by Tony Walter. This, too, conduces to a sense of reality just as it offers a resolution of the paradox, replacing both the attachment and loss model as held by more clinically involved people, and offering partial replacement of the Kübler-Ross stage theory. Moreover, more recent theories of grief that stress ongoing relationships with the dead in ‘continuing bonds’ can also be understood both in terms of those who wish to affirm ongoing kinship links of a general kind and those wishing to highlight the individuality of the relation to the deceased.

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54 Davies & Rumble 2012.
55 Walter 1996.
56 Klass, Silverman & Nickman 1996.
Conclusion

Some individuals will find a separation from their dead a relief while others find an ongoing bond just as helpful in the task of coping with life. Certainly, in Britain at least, recent decades have witnessed a growing diversity in theories of grief, not least a major shift of emphasis from theories of attachment and loss to those of continuing bonds, often including narratives about the dead. This diversity involves a degree of de-medicalization and of democratization of opinion providing an increased availability of options for clinical specialists, grief counselors, or self-help support groups in respect of bereavement. In this, continuing bonds and narrative approaches offer ‘formal’ views that easily reflect the life-experience of many bereaved people. Moreover, these approaches also allow many to voice the fact that life is difficult and that one’s grip on reality may sometimes slip, not least where death is concerned. What is certain in all this is that death and bereavement continue to challenge the human drive for meaning and a sense of reality, whether through traditional religions or varieties of emergent forms of spirituality.

References


