

Grief and the Separation of Home and Work: Some Theory-Based Observations

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Abstract

The division of labour, together with modern transport systems and certain cultural practices, enables the separation of home and work. This creates a setting for mourning very different from pre-urban societies. Three bereavement theories (reminder theory, dual process oscillation theory, and the importance of groups in the construction of continuing bonds) provide tools for understanding the dynamics of grief when the mourner inhabits two separate worlds, those of home and work. The article sketches how this might illuminate a number of home-work scenarios.

For most people today in the developed world, home and work are separated. The invention of cities several thousand years ago enabled a division of labour in which people could specialise at work to produce goods and services that others buy; few people now live and work in self-sufficient households. Kellehear (2007) has traced the implications of this for dying, but what are the implications for grieving?

Modern transport systems mean that going out to work, and going some distance to work, has become a feature of more and more people's lives. When a spouse, parent, child or sibling dies, mourners who are in work spend much of their day with workmates who probably never met the deceased and are therefore not co-mourners. (Much the same is true for children who go out every day to school.) Likewise, when a workmate dies, his or her colleagues go home to families who probably never met the deceased. The mourner is surrounded for much of the day by people who may be more or less sympathetic, more or less knowing of what to say, but they are not co-mourners. This is very different from pre-modern times, when the most common death was of a young child, and the main mourners – parents and siblings - lived and worked in the same house. Mourning today has therefore become a private experience, difficult – ultimately impossible - to share with many of those with whom we live and work. I hope in this article to show that this can both advantage and disadvantage the individual mourner.

Culture

First a quick note about culture. The separation of home and work – an economic and sociological fact - can be amplified or diminished by culture. I recall one weekday evening going to a pre-funeral wake in Tokyo, where several hundred people had travelled from work to pay their respects to one whom many knew only second-hand as the father of a colleague or neighbour. Similar public respect is paid in Ireland, and even in the USA the public viewing can be quite a community affair. A key question that differentiates cultures is: 'Would you go to the funeral of someone you never met, for example, your boss's mother?' When I ask this of my students in an English university, most are amazed: 'Of course not!' A few say, 'Yes, but that was only once, and that was to support a close friend.' The one or two who answer 'Of course!' are always Japanese or Irish. In Ireland, the formulaic 'I'm sorry for your troubles' also provides a form of condolence for those greeting a mourner that removes the difficulty English people find of now knowing what to say. Thus in cultures such as Ireland and Japan, the structural separation of home and work is, in bereavement,

reduced by cultural and linguistic formalities. English culture, by contrast, amplifies the structural experience of grief as private, something others should not intrude into.

Not everyone in Ireland or Japan welcomes the early stages of mourning being made so public. An Irish student of mine found it oppressive, on returning to Ireland for a close relative's funeral, to have to shake the hands of nearly two hundred people, most of whom she did not know; she was relieved to return home to north London where she could grieve in private. In Japan, the Soka Gakkai sect rejects the expensive reciprocal gift-giving that is at the heart of large-scale wakes. Some bosses, I am sure, would prefer to keep their mother's funeral more private!

So, I am not saying that one culture is better than another, simply that culture shapes the social context mourners find themselves in, and within which they have to do their mourning. And of course there are wide variations within any one culture. Also different work organisations have different cultures, some including workers' families more than others. My point is simply that, in bereavement, culture can have profound effects on links between a home and a job that, structurally, are separated.

Psychology

I will briefly review some common psychological processes, before going on to examine how these may interact with the separation of work from home, producing a wide range of bereavement experiences in the workplace.

Rosenblatt (1983, 39-40) argued that to be surrounded all the time by reminders of the deceased can be too much for some mourners. This may be the reason why in some small-scale pre-urban societies, the dead are excluded from conversation, familiar artefacts disposed of, the deceased's hut burnt, or places they frequented when alive avoided. In our own much more mobile and fragmented society it may be the other way around: at work, where my wife never came, there are no reminders of her at all, so even in life I place a photo of her on my desk. A continuing bond with the deceased seems to be necessary for some mourners to face the future, and reminders may assist in this. It seems that individuals, and cultures, arrange a balance between avoiding and reminding.

Stroebe and Schut's dual process model (1999) links this with what they describe as the twin tasks of mourning, emotion-focused and restoration-focused: on the one hand, going through the difficult emotions of grief; on the other hand, trying to restore a new life, which may entail dealing with secondary losses such as the loss of roles, status, or a breadwinner. Reminders of the deceased may assist the emotional work of mourning; avoiding reminders of the deceased and the pain that goes with them may assist the practical tasks of learning new skills (how to fill in a tax form, how to cook) and building a new life. Whether or not Stroebe and Schut are right that focussing on emotional pain and on restoration are hard to accomplish simultaneously and that there must be an oscillation between the two, they are surely correct that mourning often involves both processes in some or other combination. It is also likely that different cultures, different genders (Schut et al, 1997) and different generations (Walter, 1999) privilege emotion-focussed or restoration-focussed styles of coping. All this helps explain why there is such wide individual variation in styles of grieving.

If particular environments remind the mourner of the deceased while others provide no such reminders, we can see a link between inner psychological processes and the external physical and social environment. Assuming the person who has died is a family member, there is potential for a tie-up between the dual process model and the separation of home and work. At home the person mourning a family member is constantly reminded of the deceased, at work there are few if any reminders; at home,

the mourner can be emotional, at work the mourner needs to hold him or herself together. It is when they cannot hold themselves together at work that colleagues and managers are likely to be aware of problems.

One other psychological process that interacts with the various social environments in which mourners find themselves is that of constructing continuing bonds with the deceased (Klass et al, 1996). As Walter (1996) has argued, this is not entirely an intra-psychoic process, but – like meaning-construction in general (Neimeyer 2001) - is often done with other mourners who construct not just an internal personal memory but also an ancestor who belongs to the group – whether family, workplace, church, or nation. Walter argues that the prime way in which this is done is through talking with others about the deceased - at least in the West where there are no prescribed rituals for creating and interacting with ancestors. Who is available for such conversations is therefore crucial. Does the mourner speak with those who knew, or who did not know, the deceased? Central to Walter's theory is that in modernity mourners often do not live or work together, and the separation of home and work is a major cause of this. (The other major causes are longevity and geographical mobility, which mean that co-mourners – typically adults mourning an elderly parent - not only may go out to work, but are unlikely still to live in the same house.)

Let us now look at how these three theoretical perspectives – reminder theory, dual process oscillation, and the importance of groups for the creation of continuing bonds - might play out in different workplace bereavement scenarios.

Where mourners are together

With deaths in pre-industrial, pre-urban societies, and even today with deaths at the place of work or study (school, college or university), it is likely that there is a relatively large group of people (an extended family, a village, a work group, a college class) who live and/or work together and who are all, to a greater or lesser extent, bereaved or in some way affected by the death. This can have both advantages and disadvantages.

On the plus side, everyone knew the deceased and can mourn together. Those most closely bereaved gain support from knowing that others too, in their own lesser way, miss the deceased. The whole group is lessened by the loss of a member. This may be reflected in the scale of the funeral for someone who dies at work or in education: scores or hundreds of fellow students or workers attend the funeral, and those closely bereaved may gain strength from knowing the value of the deceased to the entire group. High status persons - the managing director in the case of a workplace death, the school principal in the case of a student death, the commanding officer in the case of a military death - attend the funeral, symbolising the importance of this one life to the group.

Both at the funeral and afterwards, stories can be shared about the deceased, who becomes part of the folklore of the group, in other words a group ancestor. Though there may be limits to this with temporary groups such as student cohorts, the deceased may be permanently memorialised by, for example, having a building in the school or workplace named after them. Or the dangerous working practice that led to a workplace death may be tightened up, so there may be a sense that, though the person should not have died, in the long run they have not died in vain. The continuing bond of the family with the deceased is supported through continuing institutional bonds.

On the minus side, where everyone in the group is a mourner, there can be conflict over the right way to mourn. Just as when a child dies, the mother and father may fail to comprehend the other's way of grieving, leading to a secondary loss as their own relationship falters (Riches & Dawson, 2000), so within a work group there may be different ways of grieving – gritting your teeth and getting on with the work, acting happy 'because that is what the deceased would have wanted', shedding a tear 'because that is emotionally healthy', talking about the deceased, avoiding talking about the deceased. Not everyone can accept others' ways of coping. There may also be conflicts over how to memorialise the deceased – it took twenty years for Kent State University to agree how to memorialise the nine students killed by national guardsmen in 1970 (Sellars and Walter, 1993).

There may be other difficulties. If people oscillate between grief and getting on with life, rarely is such oscillation synchronous; it needs tolerance to work or live with someone with whom you are out of synch. After a workplace death, there are reminders everywhere of the deceased: the desk she used to work at, his absence in the school playground, the lack of her humour at coffee break. The funeral or memorial service can be taken over by the workplace organisation, marginalising family grief.

Where mourners are apart

More common in today's urban world is bereavement where the key mourners spend the working day apart from one another. When a family member dies, most commonly today a retired person, the key mourners go out to work, school or college, spending the day with colleagues who never met their relative. In this section I will focus on this very common scenario. Again there are advantages and disadvantages of living in two worlds – a home full of grief and a workplace full of what sociologists call instrumental rationality.

On the plus side, the mourner may value being able to escape the house of mourning for a few hours each day. In her study of American widows, Silverman (1986) found that grief was often harder and longer for the housewife widow who every minute was reminded of her husband as she moved around the house than it was for the working widow who, for some hours at least, could escape into the workplace. The lack of reminders at work may be welcomed. If only for a few hours each day, the mourner knows she can function and be a rational person, reassuring her that she is not going mad and that a future is possible.

Likewise, in my experience as a university teacher where most of my undergraduate students live away from home, a common pattern in the weeks after the death of a grandparent is for the student to spend the week at university and to go home for weekends. There often entails not only a geographical oscillation, but also a subjective one: the student finds relief during the week in burying himself in study and in being with friends who did not know the grandparent and who provide a sense of normality; but he also needs to be with his family at weekends, to be with others who miss his granddad, and to support his mother. Bereaved children likewise can value the normality that going to school each day provides.

But there can be negatives. With no common knowledge of the deceased, there is no possibility at work of turning the deceased into a common ancestor. Workmates or schoolfriends may not know what to say. (When I was thirteen and the mother of a close schoolfriend committed suicide, I hadn't a clue what to say.)

Many mourners don't want to oscillate, but have to. For them, oscillation is an economic and institutional necessity: the child still has to go to school, and if a

breadwinner dies without substantial life insurance, the remaining partner will have more, not less, need to go out to work. But psychologically they may not be able to oscillate. At work, they cannot keep their emotions at bay and they cannot do their job well, at least on bad days. Despite the lack of reminders at work, they cannot keep the deceased out of their heads. The bereaved student cannot focus on the required reading, his mind keeps wandering and he gets behind with his studies. The student may decide to take a year out before returning to study; the worker who needs to put bread on the table cannot.

For others, it is not that oscillation is institutionally required but psychologically difficult; rather, they would like to oscillate between home and work, but cannot. Those who work away from home long-term, such as service personnel and sailors, may be in this position. Twenty years ago, one mature student from China told me her mother had died recently. Though the college had paid for her to go home for the funeral, she had to return to the UK to continue her studies for several more months before being able to go home again. She was studying in the UK at a small residential college which was as supportive as it could be, but this could not make up for the inability to go home on a regular basis. Bereaved prisoners are in a similar situation: in the UK they may attend a family funeral chained to a prison officer, but that is all; their grief has to remain internal, separated from the rest of the family and isolating them from fellow prisoners.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show how three theoretical perspectives on grief (reminder theory, the dual process model, and the importance of groups for the creation of continuing bonds) highlight many of the plusses and minuses of grieving in a world in which home and work are separated. The division of labour, leading to the separation of where we work from where we live, profoundly shapes the experience of grief; where the mourner finds herself externally interacts with what is going on internally. If we are to understand mourners' experiences, whether at work or elsewhere, psychological theories and socio-historical analysis have to be brought together. Grief does not happen in a social or geographical vacuum.

Though these theoretical perspectives alert us to some experiences mourners may have, I do not believe these reveal a picture of normal behaviour nor clear directives that will guarantee speedy return to normal functioning. Rather, what these perspectives highlight is the sheer diversity and complexity of mourners' experiences, and the need for colleagues and managers to treat, as far as possible, the bereaved worker as an individual.

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