

**PARENTAL GRIEF IN THREE SOCIETIES:
NETWORKS AND RELIGION AS SOCIAL SUPPORTS
IN MOURNING**

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ABSTRACT

How do people respond to the grief of parents over the death of their infant child? This article documents the experience of one of the authors, an American married to a Russian whose child died in England. Responses to this death by friends, colleagues and family in the USA, England, and two cities in Russia varied considerably in terms of depth and degree of engagement (emotional engagement, respect, or distance and avoidance). What factors underlie these varied responses? Two are identified, one structural, the other cultural: the strength of the social ties within social networks, and religiosity as historically sedimented within a culture. The *degree* of engagement is correlated with network form; but the *content* of engagement depends on religiosity.

For many parents who lose a child in developed societies, theodicy—finding meaning in the face of suffering and tragedy—is no mere theological or

philosophical pastime, but a necessity.¹ Parents throughout history have grieved the death of a child (Humphreys & King, 1981, pp. 216, 250-251; Pollock, 1983), but for millennia it was all too natural and normal, so did not raise questions of theodicy. A mother is unlikely to ask “Why me?” when her child dies in a society in which all parents lose one or more children (Scheper-Hughes, 1990, 1992). In modern societies, however, with child death the exception rather than the norm and with the child socially constructed as innocent (Ariès, 1962; James & Prout, 1990; Zelizer, 1985), it now raises the ultimate theodicy: the child is innocent and the death unnatural and untimely. Further, in past societies, religious meanings were widely available (and relatively less contested) to provide explanations for young death; Rosenblatt’s (1983) and Simonds and Rothman’s (1992) studies of nineteenth century America show how religious explanations for loss were common in diaries and advice books, despite churchgoing then being less than in the USA today. In the absence of culturally accepted religious meanings in modern secular societies, how do bereaved parents seek and find explanations for their tragedy? In nominally religious families, religious theodicies may fail to explain personal tragedy, leading to a double loss: the parent has lost not only their child, but also what little faith they previously had.

The intensified search for meaning in mourning a child is, like any other such activity, embedded in structural and cultural relations that both enable and constrain. Engagement by others can provide and possibly impose meanings. However, mourning can be especially anomic, as the aggrieved feels cut off from traditional social moorings or temporarily rejects them (as Wolterstorff, 1987, keenly describes). Thus, one issue for mourners is the kind of social interactions that surround them and how they facilitate the search for meaning in the face of theodicies.

Curiously, this has been little researched. There is, for example, research into the social networks of the elderly in North America (e.g., Wellman & Hall, 1986) and in Britain (e.g., Harper, 1987; Wenger, 1989), but this is not particularly focused on bereavement. Bereavement literature makes frequent reference to the need for social support (e.g., Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Currier, Holland, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2005; Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, & Abakoumkin, 1996), but it is rare to find a systematic analysis of mourners’ specific social *networks* rather than social support (but see Silverman, 1986; Schuster & Butler, 1989). Bereavement research typically makes no reference to sociological literature on networks or social-psychological research on sociometrics—and in return, these literatures makes little reference to bereavement. Likewise, there is evidence that religious belief can be a support in grief by providing social support (McIntosh, Silver, & Wortman, 1993), afterlife beliefs (Smith, Range, & Ulmer 1992), and

¹Theologically, “theodicy” explains the existence of evil and tragedy under the aegis of an all-powerful, just, and loving God; it has plagued theism, especially Christianity. More generically, theodicy explains unfairness of suffering and tragedy.

help in making sense of the death (McIntosh et al., 1993; Park & Cohen, 1993), although Stroebe and Schut (2001, pp. 357-358) conclude that much research into religion's ability to help mourners cope is inconclusive. In Britain, there is considerable discussion about helping people to find meaning in dying, associated with the notion of spiritual care as an essential component of palliative care (e.g., Cobb, 2001), but the focus is typically on dying rather than bereavement. Spiritual care is increasingly divorced, in the literature at any rate, from formal religious belief (Walter, 2002). In the USA, there has recently been considerable research into how mourners find meaning (e.g., Nadeau, 1998; Neimeyer, 2005), often associated with narrative therapy, but this is not related to sociological research on networks.

One goal of this article is to redress this imbalance by systematizing the effects of social structure and culture. For sake of simplicity, we focus on networks (structure) and religiosity/religious belief of people within those networks (culture).

Classifying Interactions and Engagement with the Bereaved

Not all interactions are the same. While the personalities involved and level of engagement will have some correlation, we suspect that network type and engagement have a stronger correlation. For purposes of this article we classify engagement along two axes. The first is degree of *general engagement*. This is the degree of support offered: from active to respectful to none. *Active engagement* implies coming forward to the bereaved either on one's own or quickly after an invitation to do so. This is personal, proactive commitment and investment in the immediate grief. We include here going out of one's way to call or visit, to seek out and send such items as literature on grieving, crying with the aggrieved (perhaps without prompting), and the like. *Respectful engagement* means offering support but at a more emotional distance—perhaps because of less commitment to the relationship, or uncertainty of how the bereaved will react. Respectful engagement is less likely to have a strong emotional component, such as crying, but will make efforts to help the bereaved.

The second axis is *theodicy engagement*, the willingness to offer not only emotional or material support but also to enter discussions of the tragedy itself and explore its theology or the search for meaning afterward. Here we classify three forms: active, hesitant, and avoidance. The first is self-explanatory: actively participating in the investigation of theodicy and meaning (at one's own initiation or after invitation). Hesitant engagement here means a willingness to address the issue, but only after initiation by the bereaved, and then only with tentative participation and propositions. The third form is avoidance. By this we do not mean that the person avoids the aggrieved altogether, although this does happen. Rather, we mean that the other avoids the subject of the death and grieving altogether (cf. Dyregrov, 2003).

The Empirical Case

The examination here is embedded in an empirical discussion drawn from a personal ethnography of one of the authors. In brief, Mitchell, the 18-month-old son of one of the authors (Jeff Hass, hereafter “JH”), died in February 2002, within 24 hours of falling ill (gastroenteritis) due to an undetected genetic disorder. As Ironstone-Catterall (2004) has observed, the natural death of a toddler is even more unexpected than that of a baby, so the search for a meaningful narrative becomes even more problematic. What makes Mitchell’s parents’ experience of mourning of particular interest sociologically, however, is that the following process of bereavement, theodicy, and search for meaning involved interactions in four different social contexts in three countries because of the parents’ biographies. JH is American, with family and close friends in the United States. Mitchell’s mother/JH’s wife is Russian, with family and friends in Russia (in St. Petersburg and Tula). The tragedy happened in Britain where both parents had lived and worked for eighteen months and had developed relations with colleagues, other parents (through play groups), and other assorted individuals—many of British extraction, although some from various European countries as well. After Mitchell’s death, his parents spent some time in Britain and Russia, with constant interaction via e-mail and telephone with American relatives and friends (with a few traveling to Britain at this time as well). Overall, Mitchell’s parents interacted with people of three different (broadly-defined) cultures—American, Russian, British/European²—linked to them through different degrees of network strength.

This outcome of this particular configuration was very varied interactions. Some of that variation, we hypothesized, is likely the outcome of network strength and relationships. However, networks cannot explain all variation, especially cross-national variation (quite extreme in one case), and we hypothesize the importance of religiosity and religious belief to explain this leftover variation. The more significant of the interactions are listed in Table 1. While this limited case cannot definitively support a theory, we suggest that it provides insights that can be tested further: namely, that network form is correlated with *degree* of engagement, but that *content* of engagement depends on religiosity as embedded in historical experience. We look first at networks, then at religiosity.

NETWORKS

A quick discussion of the terms for evaluating interactions is needed. We reduce individual relations to three types: strong tie, weak tie, and in between. The

²The category “British/European” conflates two sets of cultures with sometimes differing norms and values (Walter, 1999; Morgan & Laungani, 2004); however, *relative* to American and Russian cultures (i.e., concerning religiosity and religious traditions, social norms of interaction, etc.), a joint categorization “British/European” seems defensible, at least for the modest aims of this article.

Table 1.

Person/link quality	Location	Interaction	Character
T1/2 (ST) relations	Tula	A-Av	Not religious except occasional symbolic
T3/5 (SWT) friends		A-Av	Not religious. Encouraged drinking and avoiding the subject.
P1/2(SWT)	SPb	R-H	Friends, well-educated, religious but not dogmatic, willing to engage on our terms
P3 (SWT)		R-A	Religious, willing to engage on our terms.
P4 (SWT)		R-A	Nominally but not openly religious, American.
P5 (SWT)		A-Av	Little religious knowledge or activity. Encouraged drinking, avoiding the subject.
U1/4 (ST) cose family and friends	USA	A-A	Already religious, become more so after tragedy
U5 (ST) university friend + 2 work friends		A-H	Not particularly religious, even atheist
U6 (SWT) friends, professional colleagues		R-H	Variable degree of religiosity—often as much ritual as active, searching belief
U7 (SWT) other American relations		R-A	Variable degree of religiosity—often as much ritual as active, searching belief.
B1 (SWT) 1st colleagues	Britain	A-H	Varying degrees of spirituality. Engaged on intellectual, less religious level, though.
B2 (SWT) 2nd colleagues		R-H	Less bonding experience. Willing to engage various issues, though less depth in the discussions.
B3 (SWT) acquaintances from play group		R-Av	Varying religiosity. Less engaged, but because JH's wife did not engage them. Came to funeral.
B4 (SWT) other friends		A-H	Religious, willing to engage in deeper theological questions, but at JH's leading.
Network			Form of interaction: General support-theodicy engagement
• (ST) Strong tie = close, constant interaction, emotional component		A-A: Active-active (active support and engagement of theodicy/meaning) A-H: Active-hesitant (active general support but hesitant discussion of theodicy/meaning)	
• (SWT) between strong & weak—only occasional interaction but some emotional investment		A-Av: Active-avoidance (general support for bereaved, no engagement of theodicy/meaning)	
• (WT) Weak tie = more distant interaction (emotional investment)		R-A: Respectful-active (some distance to support, e.g., waiting; eventual engagement of theodicy) R-H: Respectful-hesitant (some distance to support, hesitant engagement of theodicy) R-A: Respectful-avoidance (some distance to support, no engagement of theodicy)	

follows Granovetter's (1973) original strong tie-weak tie formulation, modified to include a middle category. We do this because bereavement is an emotional process, and the strength of network ties should take into account both the degree of interaction (how often)—the basis of Granovetter's original formulation—and emotional investment. One can have constant interactions with a colleague (a seemingly strong tie) but no emotional investment or closeness; or one may feel closer and have more emotional investment in a relation with someone one sees only a few times a year. Thus, we offer the following. A strong tie (ST) is a relation with emotional and personal investment and commitment, embodied in constant interactions or, when circumstances prevent this, a commitment to keeping relations alive through deep discussions (including providing help and listening to the other's issues). A weak tie (WT) is a relation where A knows B, but relations are more formal or superficial. Stereotypically, a weak tie is manifested in relations where both sides send Christmas cards with basic information on children or events, but little more. The intermediary case, a tie in between strong and weak (SWT), is one where there is some personal and emotional commitment and investment, but interactions are not consistent: long stretches of time without conversation followed by moments of intense interaction and bonding, for example.

There are two potential sets of expectations. The first is that in mourning, *ceteris paribus*, the greatest engagement will come from strong ties, and least from weak ties: $ST > SWT > WT$. Geographical distance can be mitigated by communications technologies that help create both a physical and "virtual" community. In short, mourners will have their greatest opportunity to seek out new meaning and answers to difficult questions through strong ties. However, there is an alternative set of expectations. As Granovetter (1973) noted, strong ties tend to provide redundant information because both sides share similar values and knowledge. From this structural account, people engaging theodicy may be well served by weak ties, who could provide previously unknown information or views. In her study of families making sense of death, Nadeau, for example, noted that "When there was an in-law present at the interviews, meaning-making activity was more vigorous." If they do not know the family rules and taboos, "they may rush in where members would not" (2001, p. 339). Currier et al. (2005) found that students bereaved by violent death often found more support from fellow students than from their family. In short, an alternative formulation is $SWT > ST-WT$. This structural account is worth pursuing, but it comes with a caveat: whether such new views are shared depends on the degree of engagement. A weak engagement might not provide the opportunity for sharing different views that would help the mourner find meaning.

Following the structural logic, Walter (1996) has argued that, with longevity, geographical mobility, and separation of home and work, those who know the chief mourner and those who knew the deceased are often not the same people—as when my colleague's child dies or my neighbor's mother, or indeed my mother's neighbor. We are concerned here primarily with ties to the chief mourner(s) more

than ties to the deceased, which with an infant are likely to be limited in number. It seems likely, as Walter argued, that particularly close ties are likely when the person knows both the chief mourner(s) and the deceased (e.g., the child's grandparents). In this case they are co-mourners and literally share grief rather than just talk about it—though they may experience and express that grief differently, as can be the case between a mother and father whose child has died, creating what Riches and Dawson (1996) term “an intimate loneliness.”

How do networks and form of engagement correlate? At the outset, we expect that active emotional engagement and respectful engagement will be most strongly correlated with strong ties, to the parents and possibly also to the deceased child. Weak ties are most likely to engage in respectful distance: with less knowledge of the parents and their situation, they are less likely to get involved. Further, the investment and commitment to the relation is less, hence a more rational calculation might enter into the picture. Equally, if geographical distance makes a relationship a weak tie, it may be that the person has little opportunity to engage more than respectfully. At this initial state, before engaging the empirical evidence, the avoidance case is the most tricky. A natural hypothesis is that weak ties and avoidance strongly correlate, for the same reasons as respectful distance and weak ties. However, it may be that strong ties or intermediate ties have other reasons for avoiding emotional involvement in the search for answers—related to religiosity and belief, for instance. (We return to this later when we consider the Russian case.)

Table 1 provides some insights into the viability of these hypotheses about the relation between networks and engagement. The strongest emotional engagement came from JH's strong ties in the United States (where he had spent most of his 35 years). Cards and flowers immediately flooded in. Phone calls, from aunts and uncles or family friends of long standing, often involved crying, even begun by those calling from the United States. JH's parents and brother flew to Britain the next week for the funeral but were in constant contact beforehand. Other friends (in group U5—through JH's wife) were in constant contact and changed their vacation plans so as to come over as quickly as possible. Friends (strong ties) from undergraduate and graduate days also responded in various ways that suggested some emotional commitment: one actually refrained initially, due to inability to do anything constructive (which he admitted later), another took time out at home and work to listen and talk on the phone, another not only provided long conversations but also sent two short books by university academics that he thought might be particularly helpful. (They were.) The two closest high school friends (in U5) immediately came to aid: one calling as soon as he found out, the other coming up from London on a regular basis and offering constant emotional support, as well as offering his flat as a “base of operations” should Mitchell's parents wish to get away for a while. We classify both as “respectful engagement” because there was little emotional engagement or active offerings of answers to theodicy, but there was willingness to let Mitchell's parents set the agenda as to what to discuss or do.

In Britain, the correlation between network and engagement appears to hold as well. Here an interesting history must be recounted briefly. JH arrived in Britain only 18 months before—little time to settle roots with strong ties. However, intensive work in the department (restructuring the curriculum) created a sense of identity and solidarity among a group of new staff including JH, creating intermediate ties instead of solely professional ties (that would be closer to a weak tie).³ These people (B1) engaged rapidly, organizing a “posse” in which they took turns staying overnight at the house “just in case” or getting JH and his wife out of the house (walks, to parks or outside town, etc.). In the case of this group, an existing social network provided support, and at the same time the shared experience of Mitchell’s death helped solidify the group: “When someone dies, the group to which he belongs feels itself lessened and, to react against this loss, it assembles.” (Durkheim, 1930 [1912], p. 399) They did not, however, bring up the issue of theodicy, preferring to be led as to the agenda for conversation. (In one case, JH and a member of group B1 spent a long evening at a pub talking, at JH’s instigation, about religion, rationality, and the limitations of human knowledge—the spirit of Peter Berger was likely hovering overhead.) One exception in B1 engaged emotionally. He did not talk of theodicy but was openly emotional about the entire process and very active in organizing support and providing emotional help. Another set of colleagues (B2) and friends from playgroup (B3), all of whom knew Mitchell, were detached. There was less emotional engagement, little discussion of theodicy or such issues. Again, this does not mean lack of engagement: members of B3 and B4 were at Mitchell’s funeral, and one member of B3 even made helpful suggestions on grieving literature. “Respectful” or “hesitant” engagement need not mean cold or unemotional per se. However, given the lower level of emotional investment in the relationships, it is not surprising that there was little crying, for example, among this group.

RELIGIOSITY

So far, the story suggests that the prime variable affecting *degree* of involvement is the form of network relations. However, *content* of involvement is better explained by looking at variations in religiosity. Table 1 presents religiosity broadly measured through the author’s knowledge of these people and subsequent discussions with them. Superficial manifestation of religiosity was discounted, e.g. knowing rituals or wearing symbols as a matter of course without special religious knowledge or concern. (Wearing a cross around one’s neck was not a sign of religiosity per se.) The comparison between cases is, in several aspects, striking. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong correlation between religiosity and some

³Most people in this group were not British, but European. However, we suggest this itself was not so important, as degree of religiosity did not differ much. Rather, the fact of shared experiences created a sense of shared identity.

attempt to address theodicy in the American cases. For British cases, religiosity was more varied, albeit the people here (not all British, but European in general) were more likely to be secular—this might be correlated with the number of formal academics in this group. However, this contrasts with the Russian case, where academics were *more likely* to be religious and even to address theodicy—perhaps the most open of all cases here. Further, there is variation (almost extreme) in the Russian case.

American Religiosity and Theodicy

The case of American family, friends, and colleagues generally shows overlap of networks and religiosity—partly because of high levels of religiosity and religious belief in the United States, which carried over into JH’s networks. The American networks were almost entirely religious, and religiosity did make engagement with theodicy possible. Family and close family friends sometimes did not wait for JH to bring up the issue—they brought it up themselves. U3/4, a couple who are long-time friends of JH’s parents, have a strong Catholic identity that merged more recently with evangelical Protestantism. They also adopted a daughter who, it turned out, had degenerative Tayes-Sachs Syndrome and spent eleven years in a vegetative state. That is, they had direct experience with losing a child, although not sudden but drawn out and clearly inevitable. To them theodicy was a non-issue: their religious beliefs gave them a framework for addressing and answer it. Grief was not only normal, it was good: “Our tears remind us of the love that was.” Where was the purpose in all this tragedy and suffering? It simply was, and was beyond human comprehension. This was an aspect of the grand spiritual scheme of things that could not be answered through rational analysis or application of empirical investigation or logic. This was not to suggest hopelessness: in several e-mail exchanges they said that answers could come, and that U3 had an epiphany during a moment of extreme stress dealing with her daughter. The moral of this story is that religiosity not only enabled them to offer potential answers: it gave this couple the capacity to engage, even to *want* to engage, this painful and complicated issue.

American networks were generally willing to take on theodicy when asked. In these discussions, most were not hesitant to invoke religious belief, whether to answer issues of theodicy or to comfort—i.e., that this was “God’s will,” that Mitchell was somewhere better, etc. If ultimately these did not entirely satisfy the searchings of an academic sociologist steeped in the logic and tradition of Peter Berger, they were an attempt by those with strong ties to engage with questions of theodicy. JH’s university and graduate school friends were willing, once he raised the topic, to discuss their own views and experiences—which were quite varied—in which were embedded their own answers to issues of theodicy and where to look for them. While they waited for rather than initiated interaction, they did not shy away from big questions. In the context of an exchange of e-mails, one friend

from college framed his approach to theodicy by relating how he visited a medium—an event that began as a joke but in the end left him with an appreciation of a larger reality. (His father died when he was a teenager.) Another friend from graduate school, a sociologist of religion and an evangelical, discussed theodicy in a sophisticated theological and sociological manner, relating his approach to suffering through the imagery and narrative of the crucifixion—that suffering occurs but also links humanity to God, giving suffering meaning. (He also took the initiative to send Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son* and Peter Berger’s *Rumor of Angels*.) One interesting case is P4—an American in Russia JH had known for eleven years. She unabashedly brought up religious themes when JH engaged her, even volunteering her own experiences and beliefs: concerning an older brother who had died in childbirth, as well as vague but important beliefs in ultimate meaning and higher planes of existence.

One interesting aspect of the Americans’ responses, however, was that theodicy often did not have complex theological or philosophical roots (the evangelical sociologist aside). There is an immense formal and informal literature—from Aquinas to internet discussion boards—about this. The quantity and degree of mental gymnastics applied to questions of theodicy attests to the fact that this is a troublesome issue not easily answered. As one college friend put it, “We’ll just have to wait and see.” This admission of limits of knowledge was not a cop-out—it was embedded in a broader engagement. However, American religiosity provided easy answers. As Klass notes (1999, pp. 194-202), American civil religion is optimistic (the power of positive thinking, cognitive therapy, etc). This does help some grieving parents, but this cultural optimism is based on a denial of ageing, death, sin, and evil. As U1 (JH’s father) stated, there must be ultimate meaning: “Why else would we all be here? There has to be a reason.” This has not been a satisfying answer for generations of philosophers, but it worked for U1’s (not entirely simplistic) theology.

In a sense, the American response is not unexpected, and not only because of religiosity. Religiosity might provide the tools and courage to face such difficult issues as tragedy, suffering, and theodicy, but it might be compounded by another factor: the American belief in community and practices and rituals of community bonding in times of difficulty. Alexis de Tocqueville noted the importance of community to American life, even political life, and later scholars have noted how communities are centers of political action and legitimacy. This might overlap with religiosity in facilitating engagement. Where religiosity emboldens, community-based political culture provides the *duty* to engage in times of stress.

Beyond theodicy, the American network was generally active in engaging emotional support. The first ten days after Mitchell’s death, friends and relatives called constantly—including family friends with whom JH had not spoken for perhaps three or four years (mostly due to geographical distance). Two women with whom JH had grown up (daughters of his parents’ close friends) called, both crying fairly strongly and expressing both empathy and the plea not to give up

hope. (Both had two children each.) College friends offered JH to call at any time “just to talk, even if it’s three in the morning.”

British Religiosity and Theodicy

In the British case, religiosity weakens. (We reiterate that this case is not entirely “British,” as some people in this category originally hailed from other European countries.) This is not entirely surprising, given the lower level of religiosity and higher level of secularization in Britain and most of the rest of Europe (Martin, 1978)—although whether this is true secularization and loss of faith, or “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1990), remains disputed. Within the structure of British friends and colleagues, religion did not come up in relation to bereavement, and there was little engagement from either side on theodicy. JH did not always bring up the issue or tried to be too subtle—mostly from the feeling that this is a non-issue among academics—but as a rule religion was absent. This fits our reading of bereavement literature and research, in which religion is mentioned as a support quite often in American, but rarely in British, literature.

There were exceptions to this general rule. One exception was a woman in group B4 that JH had known since arriving in Britain. This person regularly attends church and in the past was in Bible study groups. She did bring up her views when JH engaged her, in a forthright attempt to answer questions and proved willing to engage in ongoing discussions. Some of these were in person, others via e-mail, and in both she raised biblical passages and details to support her worldview: namely, that human limitations (seeing through a glass darkly) make engagement of such deeper issues difficult. However, while she did not engage the issue on a philosophical level, she did engage on a personal level. While she waited for JH to initiate discussion, she was then open about her personal views, not to dictate them but to mention them as help. Her views, calmness, and confidence certainly stemmed from her religiosity, as religious themes and ideas wound their way into her comments (for example, relating how her daughter claimed that Mitchell was waiting for us all elsewhere). Religiosity took the place of abstract, secular philosophical, methodological, or theoretical scaffolding.

Otherwise, the remainder—colleagues (academic and non-academic), play-group members, and the like—were not forthcoming with religious explanations and discussions and were less likely to engage directly in issues of theodicy. In the British case, religiosity was also fortuitously correlated with network. To be blunt and reductionist to suggest a point, in contrast to the British network, it seems that the Americans were more likely to engage because of stronger network links *and* because of stronger religiosity that allowed them to face the question. This said, regardless of their relatively lower level of apparent religiosity, members of group B1 did provide general emotional support at this time and afterwards—demonstrating that unwillingness to engage theodicy (from those people or JH) does not equate with unwillingness or inability to engage on other issues of

grieving and support. Engagement for support was greater: suggesting books on grief and giving advice on the funeral process, for example, spending the night at JH's house to be present in case of need.

There is one problem thus far, however: it may be that religiosity is accidental, and that network strength is really the key factor. At this point in JH's life, the stronger networks were with Americans. Had the stronger links been with the British network, the picture might be different. However, a third case comes in that brings back the importance of religiosity when network strength is controlled for: the riddle of Russians' responses.

The Russian Riddle

Variation of responses in the Russian case demonstrates the importance of religiosity *and* engagement. We begin with one note: ties between the Russians and JH arose through common experience and interests or other past engagements, with no thought whatsoever to religion or religiosity when creating these relations—in the methodological jargon, there was no selection bias. The Russian responses show that intermediary ties could lead either to engagement or avoidance—opposite reactions, depending on religiosity. That is, network strength may facilitate, but ultimately religiosity shapes the probability of actual engagement.

Religion and death have a history in twentieth-century Russia rather different from that in the West. The Communist Party actively promoted secularism and atheism, and secular rituals—e.g., bureaucratic registration in state offices of births, marriages, and deaths—took the place of baptisms and church-based weddings and funerals (Lane, 1980). Not that these disappeared—there were believers who often agitated for religious freedom (especially at the beginning and end of World War II). But the new ideology of crude materialism, rationality, and secularism deprived Russians of a means to deal with theodicy. Rituals for parting with the deceased became cold and mechanical, with the Party managing to intrude into the personal traits and relations of the deceased and the grieving (Merridale, 2000). This had the side effect of depriving people of the means to ask and answer questions about death, which now stood before them as a cold, hard fact of life, and a frightening one at that.⁴ Further, Russia's twentieth century history was one of death: famine in the 1920s and 1930s (more in Ukraine than Russia, however); Gulags and Stalin's terror; perhaps twenty million deaths in World War II and sixty million deaths overall in the USSR 1917-89 from war and state terror. The post-Soviet era has not been especially kind: the birth rate dipped below the mortality rate, and male life expectancy has either reached a plateau or worsened

⁴This is not to imply that all agnostics and atheists approach their mortality with fear. However, such people in the West choose their personal belief system—it is not thrust upon them. Hence, there is likely a correlation between choosing atheism and accepting mortality with some calm.

since the 1970s, depending on one's data source (Seale, 2000). Death is part of Russians' history, as are forced secularization and replacement of religious or spiritual belief with a formal rationalistic, materialistic ideology that was not always warmly embraced.

In this context, two dialogues were at work: what we call a "dialogue of avoidance" and a "dialogue of meaning." The dialogue of meaning occurred with JH's networks in St. Petersburg. P3 was clearly the most religious in JH's network, although he entered the picture later (summer 2002). He did not bring up subjects of tragedy and theodicy, rather letting JH do so. When this happened, he consistently provided positive input—"positive" in the sense of something purposive (regardless of what one might think of the actual veracity of the content). He was willing and able to engage (on several occasions) within the bounds of his knowledge of theology and philosophy of theodicy—not that of Western but of Eastern Christianity.⁵ What is important for this discussion is that P3 engaged not only patiently but also with a confidence born of this own belief system's content and strength. Tragedy and theodicy were not issues he shied away from.

P1/2, a husband-wife couple, were not as religious as P3 (also their friend). However, both held religious beliefs: P2 (paradoxically) from her intelligentsia background, P1 from his own life experiences, especially the collapse of communism. Both were willing to engage the issues of tragedy and theodicy, but on JH's terms and timing. Willing to listen, they were also willing to discuss difficult questions of knowledge and meaning. P1 admitted when he had reached his limits but indicated that this did not mean an end to the discussion. Having studied World War II in great detail, he understood both tragedy and the many ways of coping with it—theodicy and theology, in a sense, were part and parcel of his studies. P2 as well was willing to engage, and she, more than P1, turned to the religious components of her cultural "tool kit" (Swidler, 1986). In a long, convoluted discussion of the nature of evidence of anything spiritual, she attacked materialist rationalism for its own biases and narrowness of vision, drawing upon philosophical and theological arguments. That is, she had, like P3, material on which to draw when engaging this difficult issue—and that likely helped her engage it at all.

Other colleagues and friends of JH were willing to engage, for example, a sociologist and an economist who each drew on their own beliefs and knowledge from their particular systems of interest. The sociologist found Tao interesting and drew on this to discuss levels of existence and meaning beyond Western limitations. He was also willing to discuss how to use the sociology of knowledge to argue how to examine theodicy and that rationality was not as all-powerful as adamant Marxists and rational choice theorists claimed it was. The economist found little of use in Christianity but did have strong beliefs in human spirituality.

⁵Two potential answers are these. First, humans are limited, hence we cannot know the exact answer to theodicy (at least in this life). P3 did not advance this position. The other is that tragedy is the echo of the Creation—the embodiment of imperfection in an as-yet imperfect world.

Theodicy had no answer he could see, but this did not mean it did not have one. He did engage JH on the issue, turning to his own beliefs, e.g., in the possibility, even if rare, of mediumship—this, interestingly, from someone who sometimes discussed the advantages of *homo economicus*! These people did not shift the subject, nor did they set out to avoid the issue. Rather, they let JH set terms and subjects of discussion, and engaged, with varying degrees of confidence but always openly.

The dialogue of avoidance occurred in interactions with people in the network of JH's wife, primarily in Tula (close relations and friends). While all these people were shattered by the event, their reaction was paradoxical: close engagement on an emotional level (providing support), but avoidance of the issue of death and theodicy, and even avoidance of discussing the tragedy itself. Arriving in Tula only a few weeks after the tragedy, we found no pictures of Mitchell anywhere, whereas six months earlier his picture adorned several apartments.⁶ There was no real discussion about the subject. In fact, there were only two real moments of open acknowledgement: once when JH's grandfather-in-law said that the tragedy had taken ten years off his life, and once when JH's father-in-law (nearly in tears) tried to articulate his own grief while acknowledging his inability to do so. Contrast this to JH's parents' reaction: pictures of Mitchell on the refrigerator, discussion then and later of his life and what might have been, etc.⁷

JH's wife's peers, in Tula and Petersburg, also demonstrated a dialogue of avoidance—not only in reference to theodicy, but to the trauma at all. A close Petersburg acquaintance, P5, did not hesitate to interact with us socially, inviting us to her apartment or coming by our abode. However, her reaction was much the same each time: to talk about her life, about Petersburg, about gossip concerning common acquaintances or memories of university days. Further, she actively brought out the bottle of vodka, beer, or wine. (P5 is not an alcoholic.) The symbolic message was clear: avoid the subject, and use alcohol if necessary, not only to dull the pain but to dull the conversation. This was not dissimilar to Tula friends T3/4 and T5 (with whom we met together at times). At her apartment not long after arriving in Tula, T5 said aloud (with JH present) that she and T3 had discussed how to handle the situation and decided “to act as if nothing had happened.” They actively set issues of conversation, making sure to bring up questions about England, about the house we had bought, providing gossip that

⁶The one exception was a childhood friend who, hearing of Mitchell's death, rushed home to look for a picture he remembered of Mitchell and his daughter playing together. At the moment he was telling this story, he also must have felt discomfort from other Russians present, for he became defensive and apologetic for bringing up “the event.” This came as a shock to JH for two reasons. First, in his American background the deceased were remembered, and remembrance was institutionalized in mourning practices, as also in England (Riches & Dawson, 1998). Second, Russians had put up pictures of those deceased or disappeared in World War II or in other tragedies.

⁷Cf. Bronfenbrenner (1971) for a comparison of bonding between parents and children in the USSR and USA.

could lead to further gossip, and the like. They engaged, but to avoid not only theodicy but the entire issue of Mitchell's death. Healing meant avoiding.⁸

The difference in these engagements—especially the paradox of closer familial ties and some peers leading to a dialogue of avoidance—pivoted on religiosity. Most of JH's intermediate Russian ties have some degree of spirituality and religiosity—if they do not believe in some form of Christianity, they have beliefs in something spiritual (*pace* Davie, 1990). Most of his wife's were less religious. When JH engaged them, they readily admitted having little idea about anything spiritual or even where to begin (e.g., T5). When JH brought this issue up with P2 and P4 (separately), both suggested the lack of religiosity at work: these others, in the face of death and theodicy, had no meanings or explanations to handle the issue. Theodicy was not a non-issue, but it was an issue they could not address and thus avoided. It appears P2 and P4's hypothesis is supported by the data, at least from first glance. Lack of religiosity, compounded by clear knowledge of Russia's tragic past, likely made them feel helpless in the face of this new tragedy. How could they answer JH's questions if they had little faith and its intellectual history of theodicy to draw on, and if in their own national history bad things often happened to good people?

One interesting aspect of these responses is the near-perfect correlation between engagement and *with whom* the engagement was established. JH's ties had some religiosity and were willing to engage; his wife's were not. Answering this riddle is difficult at present, but we have the following hypotheses. JH is an academic, and the dialogues within his network usually had some degree of philosophical or scientific content. This provided one basis for interaction: constant, taken-for-granted engagement of abstract and not always pleasant issues. The discussions usually revolved around unknowns, implying acceptance of the limits of human knowledge. In other words, the questioning of theodicy and the search for "something more" was facilitated by the general acceptance that there might be something more beyond existing knowledge, and that it was our job to discover this. JH's wife's networks were not academic, or if they were, were more "professional" than "intellectual" academics, driven more by the trappings of the job (e.g., status) than by scholarship for itself. In JH's observations of their discussions, the content was certainly not vapid—there was plenty of complaining about politics, the intricacies of labor and the consumer-supplier nexus in the West versus in Russia, some history now and then—but it was also more practical and everyday, with little if any discussion of "theory," "methods," and broader philosophical questions. That is, in addition to weak or nonexistent religiosity, abstract discussion and issues were not part of their usual conversation.

⁸It is possible that there was deep discussion when JH was not present, but he doubts this, considering it was he who tried to bring up the subject sometimes, in a roundabout way with people with whom relations were weaker.

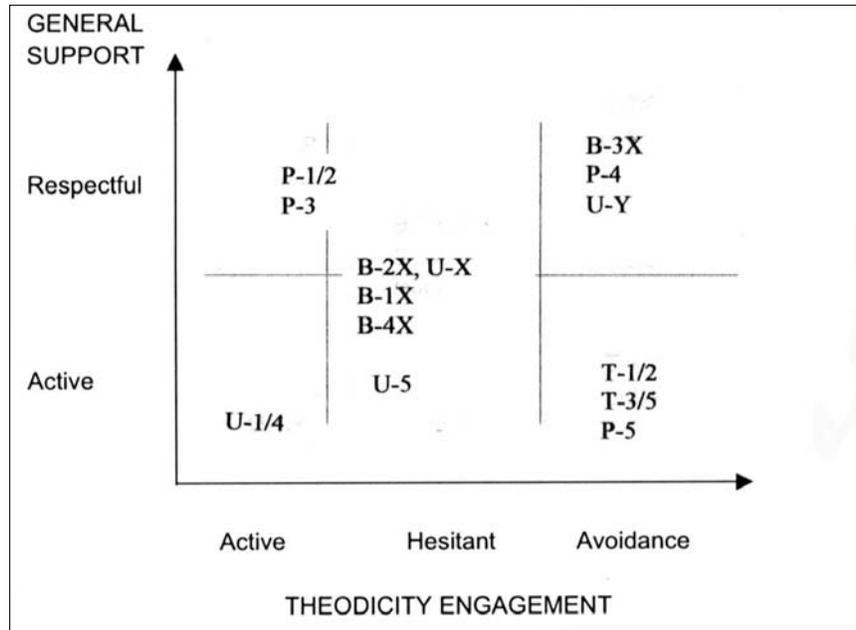


Figure 1.

The overall pattern of interactions is illustrated in Figure 1.

CONCLUSION

Though our data comprise 21 individuals or groups in 4 very different places, nevertheless our analysis remains based on one person's experiences, so generalization is dangerous. What we suggest instead is that our attempt to compare and systematize opens up the way for further research. First, networks need greater systematization. The discussion above suggests that network strength is correlated with engagement in the processes of grieving and searching for meaning. Students of networks suggest that weak ties provide non-redundant information, crucial to job searches (Granovetter, 1973). Others note that strong ties are not unimportant: for example, during the process of applying for career advancement and promotion, strong ties provide moral support and help with letters of recommendation and developing strategies. That is, in the job market, strong and weak ties provide complementary resources. For grieving and the search for meaning, complementarity may become contradiction. Weak ties can provide non-redundant information in the search for meaning. We know what our strong ties will say, but our weak ties can provide theological or existential

perspectives that we may not have considered. Yet because of the likely emotional distance, we are less likely to engage weak ties in such discussions because of lack of comfort. Discussions of grief and theodicy are not easy to initiate, for the grieving as well as for their weak ties. Strong ties are more likely to have emotional qualities that mediate this unease and make discussions possible—but what value is added?

A second issue is comparison, and here religion enters the picture. One difference between the character of the American and British networks was degree of religiosity, and this may have accounted in part for the form and content of engaging discussions of tragedy and theodicy. The Russian case only makes this issue more curious. The peculiarities of Russian history and religion's place therein, and responses seen here, suggest a contrast between low religiosity in Britain and Russia. In the former, secularization, decline in religiosity, and "believing without belonging" have been long-term, almost evolutionary, in a context and discourse of advancing science and education. While the declining strength and attractiveness of the Church of England and the rise of the secular Left may have aided the fall in religiosity, this did not happen overnight. As such, this process gave people time to think (even if superficially) about their own theological positions and the possibility to adapt. For those who rejected religion and then accepted it back into their lives, the churches and their rituals remained. To put it bluntly, people themselves, in the face of life's cold, hard facts and events, made up their own minds, and in so doing might have come up with their own rationalizations and answers to theodicy (including rejecting it as a non-issue).

In Russia, religion was persecuted, only seeing the light of day again recently. Except for the theocratic Bolshevik elite and their activists (such as the League of Militant Atheists), Russians in general did not decide to reject religion: that decision was made for them, as were answers about theodicy (i.e., it is a non-issue, or that life had meaning only in building Soviet socialism). This may have fulfilled some people, but certainly not all. Further, the communist alternative to religion faltered and fell in the 1980s, leaving an ideological and ideational vacuum. As a result, unlike in Britain, weak religiosity (when coupled with a tragic twentieth-century history) left people defenseless in face of personal tragedy—making the dialogue of avoidance a powerful ritual. Avoidance may, of course, be used in particular contexts, such as the death of children, but not in others, such as the death of soldiers in World War II, where at least the death had meaning (defense of the Motherland). This requires more investigation.

One important variable we have avoided is gender: the story here is of father and son. Networks are as gendered as any other structure or practice, and we do not discount that some details may have differed were this told from the *mother's* perspective. The extent to which a mother's and father's stories differ might be related to other contexts, such as work or friendship circles or the particular gender relations within the individual family. In this particular case, the mother's search for meaning took a different route: JH's wife was less interested in theodicy and set

out on a “this-worldly” search for a means to “move on.” This did make her search any less painful or profound, merely a different spin on the search for meaning in the shadow of death and grief. Thus, for reasons peculiar to this case, we doubt this difference was due to gender per se. That said, many of the interactions were not so different from what was seen here, and in fact many of hers are in this very story. We suspect that were a mother to ask the same questions JH asked, networks and religiosity would play out in similar ways—although mothers might be more likely to actively gather around a grieving mother than fathers around a grieving father.

In conclusion, this short essay suggests the need and outline for a future plan of study: one that examines contexts (work, religion and religiosity, networks, meanings of parenthood) in which mourners search for meaning, answers to theodicy, and new certainty. One of those contexts under examination must be world regions with different histories, national traditions and practices, and structures. Systematic cross-country research in bereavement support is virtually non-existent; we hope this article has at least demonstrated its potential.

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