

MODERN GRIEF, POSTMODERN GRIEF

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Abstract

The terms modernity and postmodernity refer to social structure, while modernism and postmodernism refer to culture; these four concepts illuminate contemporary developments in mourning. *Modernity* fragments social relations, isolating the mourner who in daily life is surrounded by non-mourners. Two responses to this are: private grief (e.g. England) which affirms individuality and the nuclear family, and social mourning (e.g. Japan, Ireland) which affirms the diverse networks of urban modernity. *Modernism* affirms faith in progress, in the future, in science, in expertise, and in the young, reflected in twentieth century grief psychology, with its emphasis on leaving the dead behind and therapy to help malfunctioning individuals adjust. *Postmodernity* entails new forms of social relationships. Mourners may join groups in which they fuse with others who never knew the deceased, but who have suffered the same kind of loss; first-hand experience is valued over expert knowledge. Virtual relationships are also formed, e.g. mourning for dead celebrities and murdered children known only through the media. *Postmodernism* deconstructs science and other meta-narratives, and celebrates diversity, tradition and heritage, reflected in theories that emphasise continuing bonds with the dead and the diverse ways people grieve. Some now say there should be no norms for grief, but no previous society has ever operated without such norms and it is an open question whether in the long run this will prove sustainable.

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Grief is usually studied by psychiatrists and psychologists, who see it as an emotion located within the physical body. But grief - not only its behavioural expression but also to some extent its emotions - is profoundly influenced by social structure and by culture (Lofland 1985). In this article I use the terms modernity and postmodernity to refer to social structures, while modernism and postmodernism refer to associated cultures (Davie 1994:191-2). I aim to show that these four concepts illuminate how mourning, social support for mourners and theories of mourning arise out of, and respond to social structure and culture. Much of the material in this article is elaborated at greater length in Walter (1999), but this present article breaks new ground in structuring the material systematically in terms of the concepts of modernity and postmodernity, modernism and postmodernism. In this I am following Stroebe et al (1992) who pioneered the application of the concepts of romanticism, modernism and postmodernism to models of grief.

MODERNITY (social structure)

In small villages in traditional societies, everyone knows each other, so when someone dies the entire village has lost a member and therefore to a greater or lesser degree the entire village mourns. Modern societies, by contrast, are characterised by urbanisation and geographical mobility, leading to more complex and fragmented social circles. The modern individual is detached from tradition, place, and kinship (Giddens 1991): I live in place A, shop in a supermarket two miles away on the outskirts of town, commute twenty miles to work in place B, go to church in place C, play golf in place D, and every month visit my elderly parents who live 100 miles away in place E. My neighbours, my workmates, the other members of my church, the members of my golf club, my extended kin – all are based in different places, and there is little or no overlap of membership between these various groups. Of course, this tendency is more apparent in societies such as Britain and North America which are highly individualistic and have high levels of geographical mobility; it is less common, for example, in Italy, where people are more likely to live, work, play, and worship within their natal town and live in the same apartment block as their parents. But in the extreme case I have portrayed, when I die those who mourn me are not the residents of one coherent village – rather, there are a few neighbours here, some workmates or ex-workmates there, some relatives scattered in various places, etc, etc.

This fragmented pattern is repeated when we move from a person's broad social networks to their extended family. In traditional societies, the typical death is of a child, and the chief mourners – parents and siblings – live under the same roof. Mourning is a shared experience of the household: those you live with are those most affected by the death. In modern societies, by contrast, the typical death is that of an old person. The chief mourners – adult children, and possibly an elderly spouse – live apart from each other, and their daily contacts are mainly with colleagues, friends and neighbours who did not know the deceased. There are three reasons for this. First, longevity means that the old person's children have long since left home and so are no longer in the same house as the widow, nor in the same house as each other. Second, geographical mobility means they have moved not just next door, but more likely to the other side of town, to another town, to another country, or even to another continent, so the adult child's friends and neighbours are unlikely to have known the old person. Third, the separation of home and work means that colleagues at work are unlikely to know the deceased. The chief mourners are all physically separated from one another. (This pattern is especially marked when students go away from home to university: when a grandparent dies, none of their fellow students

will have met the grandparent, and probably will not have met any other members of the student's family.)

So the fragmented social and geographical life of modern individuals is thrown into high relief when they become mourners. How do modern societies deal with this? There are two very different cultural responses:

Private grief: In England, grief is presumed to be the property of a few close family members. Grief is seen as private, a family affair from which others are excluded (Gorer 1965). People outside this small circle are rarely defined as mourners, their role being on occasion to 'support' those who are mourning. Rather few people – close kin, maybe one or two neighbours, a member of staff from the nursing home, perhaps 15 people in all - attend the typical funeral of an old person. You go to the funeral only if you knew the deceased – and with a very old person, most of those who knew her are themselves dead, or too frail to make the journey to the funeral. In England one does not attend the funeral of one's boss's mother. Those who do not see themselves as mourners respect the grief of the family by not intruding upon it, though they will always be on the lookout for small ways in which they can support individual mourners. A radical divide is thus created between mourners and everybody else; while geographically separated from each other, mourners are conceptually separated from most of the people with whom they are in everyday contact. At best, such people can say they are 'Sorry', but what they mean it is they are sorry the mourner is upset, not that the deceased has died, for the well-wishers never knew the deceased. They cannot share the mourner's grief. Grief is seen as a private, inner emotion, inaccessible to others, and professional help comprises one-to-one counselling for individuals who are struggling with this. These norms thus confirm the importance of the individual, of individual experience, and the nuclear family (Walter 1999: ch.8). The English norm of private grief is criticised by some for its isolation of the mourner, and for its supposed 'denial' of death (Walter 1994).

Private grief is also linked with a key tenet of cultural modernism, namely individual liberty. In England, socially prescribed rules for mourning were increasingly abandoned from the late 19th century, the motive being related to women's emancipation. The social requirements of Victorian mourning had weighed far more heavily on women than on men, but from the 1880s onwards, starting with the upper class and slowly trickling down to other classes in the twentieth century, the idea gained ground that expressions of grief should reflect personal feeling, rather than social prescription. Indeed feminist historian Taylor (1983) argues that the requirements of mourning were one way in which Victorian women had been kept in their place by a patriarchal society. If the modern woman is to grieve not as dictated by society but as she personally feels, then she needs not to be under external surveillance; hence her grief needs to be private.

Social mourning: In Ireland and Japan, the fragmentation of modern social relations is dealt with in a very different way. The rule for attendance at funerals is fundamentally different: you should attend if you knew the deceased or (more likely) you know one or more of the chief mourners. Thus in Japan it is expected that you attend the funeral of your boss's mother. The evening before the funeral of an old person, the wake may be attended by 500 people who visit on their way home from work and are received by the family. Each brings *koden*, a money gift of a size that reflects how close you are to the chief mourner, and some months later the family must reciprocate with a gift of their own to each well wisher. As elsewhere in Japanese society, relationships are affirmed by the reciprocal giving of gifts (Hendry 1989); and as with other rites of passage, the scale and lavishness of Japanese funerals has been increasing with post-war

affluence (Suzuki 2001). In Ireland, it has been traditional for anyone who knows the family to attend the wake, a tradition that is continuing with Ireland's rapid modernisation. Many at a Japanese or Irish wake have never met the deceased. So the funeral affirms not the deceased as an individual, nor even the nuclear family, but the diverse networks of relationships in which family members are enmeshed: the company, the neighbourhood, the golf club, the church/temple, etc. It should be added that not all Japanese approve of this obligation to attend many funerals each year, nor of the expense that families must go to in order to arrange them; and some Irish who live in England find the social obligations of a funeral back home overwhelming.

In this section, I have argued that structural features of modernity (longevity, mobility, urbanisation, separation of home and work) profoundly affect the social context in which mourning takes place. How any one modern society responds to this, however, can vary considerably, and I have sketched two opposite cultural responses – the English, and the Japanese/Irish. In one, the individual's fragmented networks of social contacts is removed from the process of mourning, in the other it is made central.

MODERNISM (culture)

If modernity refers to a particular configuration of social relations, modernism refers to a configuration of culture. Modernism entails faith in rationality, science, expertise, progress, the future, and the young, all of which are clearly reflected in twentieth century grief psychology (Stroebe et al 1992; Walter 1999: ch.9).

First, those who understand grief are experts, and their expertise is typical that of the medical science of psychiatry. The gurus who in the twentieth century have gained global authority to speak about the wild passions of grief are not poets or wise women, but psychiatrists such as Parkes (1996), Bowlby (1979), and Kübler-Ross (1970), and psychologists such as Worden (1983, 1991) and Stroebe and Schut (1999). Bereaved people are more likely to turn to their doctor than to a priest. Despite occasional protestations, grief has become medicalised, rather than a natural human experience or a social phenomenon. As in other areas of psychiatry, a key aim is to distinguish abnormal from normal grief -- very different from more traditional norms of grief being socially appropriate or spiritually assisting the deceased. Professional expertise is manifested through the one-to-one consultation between therapist and client, or through the book or magazine article on grief written by an expert.

Second, what do these experts advise? From Freud (1917) through Bowlby (1961) to Worden (1983), the message has been that grief has a goal, and the goal is for the mourner to detach from the painful emotions of loss so that she can once again become an autonomous individual, free to contract new relationships with other autonomous individuals. Through sexual union, birth and parenting, humans become attached to one another, and grief is the pain of those attachments being sundered; in modernist grief psychology, the pain has to be worked through so that the mourner can be once again reconstituted as a free individual. Key mantras are to 'let go', 'move on'; the goal is 'closure'; grief is to be 'resolved'. The dead, like the old and like the past, are to be left behind. Modernist grief psychology is of course a lot more complex and subtle than this, but given a twentieth century culture that emphasises progress and the future, the message that has been received has primarily been to 'let go' and 'move on'.

Many of these theories involved stages (Kübler-Ross), phases (Parkes), or tasks (Worden), indicating that grief moves towards a goal. Thus grief was placed within developmental psychology. Just as Piaget and other developmental psychologists saw children's play not as something in its own right, but as a way in which the child develops capacities needed in adulthood, so each manifestation of grief is seen as part of a process helping the adult move toward autonomy. In assuming behaviour is geared to progress toward the future, developmental psychology is a true child of modernism. Though the main theorists were at pains to say that not every mourner moves through the stages or tasks in a predetermined order, within a wider climate of modernism that is how they were interpreted to and by the public at large. In countries where grief had become private, parents kept their own grief to themselves, so children never learned what grief entails; there was thus a ready market for deterministic popularisations of modernist theories that sketched a clear path through grief.

This cluster of concepts is modern, but it is also Western. In modern urban Japan and China, mourning rituals entail not letting go of the dead but transforming them into an ancestor; the living go on into the future with, not without, the ancestors (Klass 1996; Smith 1974; Suzuki 1998). It is not unusual for a modern Japanese housewife to offer a portion of breakfast not only at the table for the living but also at the household shrine to the dead; or for a business to consult the ancestors before making an important financial decision. At the O Bon Festival in mid-August, millions of Japanese invite the dead back for a day. In the West, many mourners do in fact turn their dead into ancestors, whom they respect and consult, but there is no public acknowledgement of this – it remains private, even a shameful secret. It is personal behaviour, not part of culture (Bennett 1987; Walter 1999: ch.3). Its main formal ritual expression is Spiritualism, in which a medium contacts the dead, but this is a practice which is deemed by both secular and religious authorities as at best marginal, at worst dangerous or satanic (Walliss 2001).

The third aim of twentieth century grief psychology is to help the individual mourner adjust back into society. Grief, like love, temporarily drives us mad. But whereas a modern industrial society seems able to cope with love, indeed relies on it as a counterbalance to the meaninglessness of much industrial and bureaucratic labour (Lasch 1977) and uses individuals' need to support their family as a whip to drive them into such labour, the madness of grief sits less easily within a economy organised on rational principles. It is in this context that the second half of the twentieth century has seen the considerable growth of grief therapy and bereavement counselling; though the individual therapist or counselor may be genuinely concerned for the health of the individual client, this takes place within a society in which schools, universities and companies need their members returned to full functioning as soon as possible (Charles-Edwards 2005).

Romanticism. As argued at greater length elsewhere (Stroebe et al 1992; Walter 1999: ch.2), though modernism is the driving force behind twentieth century grief psychology, the very different culture of romanticism has been as or more influential on popular twentieth century notions of grief. In romanticism, love - between lovers, between parents and children - is eternal. Tragic young death has been a popular theme in both grand opera and contemporary pop songs; the message is that love continues beyond the grave. So while experts advise mourners to let go, the very same mourners may be inscribing tombstones with sentiments such as:

Those you love don't go away
They walk beside you everyday
(Kensal Green Cemetery, London, 1998)

Twentieth century mourners therefore inhabited a culture that was giving them contradictory messages whether or not to let go.

There are also contradictory messages about whether or not to express grief. As well as national cultural differences, key factors are war and peace (Walter 1999: ch.2). Generations influenced by large-scale death in war are likely to espouse stoicism, a containment of grief that is simply too great to express. By contrast, generations brought up in peace and affluence almost expect death not to occur, and when it does, especially if the deceased is not very old, see it as tragic; moreover there is leisure and time to express the pain of grief. So there is a contradiction within affluent, peaceful industrial societies - on the one hand they presume rational, predictable order; on the other hand, death's unpredictability disturbs the individual's psychological order.

POSTMODERNITY (social structure)

If traditional societies are typified by small-scale villages where everyone knows everyone else, and modern societies by large-scale cities where mobile people belong to a number of non-overlapping social circles between which the only connecting thread is the individual, then postmodernity in an increasingly globalised world of instant communication between strangers produces new ways in which previously isolated individuals can relate. This influences how mourners can relate to one another and to the wider public.

Traditional and modern mourning entail solidarity between those who knew the deceased, and more or less support from those who know the mourners. Postmodern mutual help groups, however, bring together people who hitherto had no knowledge of one another: what they have in common is that they have suffered the same kind of loss (Walter 1999: ch.11). So there are groups for widows, for parents who have lost a child, for parents who have lost a child through suicide, for those whose child has been killed by a drunk driver, for teens who have lost a sibling, etc, etc. In the mutual help group, solidarity is based not on pre-existing relationships of kinship, neighbourhood, or work, but on a shared type of experience. Members' experience of grief had hitherto been intensely private, isolating even, but in the group there is relief, even on occasion ecstasy, at finding others who have experienced the same feelings. Previously isolated individuals bond with each other. This, incidentally, is the reason that such groups can easily fragment and subdivide. As Rock (1998) has shown, a group for bereaved parents may fragment into two when those whose child has been murdered realise that their experience is very different from those whose child has died of leukaemia; and the emerging group for parents of murdered children may in turn fragment when those whose child has been murdered by a family member realise that their experience is utterly different from those whose child has been murdered by a stranger. Fusion, fission, fusion, fission, is the natural history of such groups: if the feelings can't be shared, the group splits, possibly leading to the formation of a new splinter group.

The entry ticket to the group is shared experience, an experience that fuses members to each other, even as it has cut them off from friends and neighbours who knew, but had a different relationship to, the deceased. In fact the more cut off from the rest of society, the more members feel the group to be the only place where they are understood. Professionals and experts are typically excluded. Indeed many mutual help groups are united not just by a valuing of experience, but also by a hostility to the so-called 'knowledge' of experts who themselves are not bereaved, and often hostility to the language of modernist psychology and its tendency to

pathologise that which does not fit the norm. The mutual help group therefore represents a radical break with the modernist faith in professional expertise. (Some mutual help groups are facilitated by a professional, but if the professional has not himself experienced the relevant type of bereavement, then such groups are a modern/postmodern hybrid.)

If the key dynamic of mutual help groups is the powerful fusion of shared experience, the dynamic of campaigning groups is anger, directed outward at the medical or legal establishment. Groups such as RoadPeace or Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) aim to change the law. For them the devastation of bereavement wreaked by intentional or unintentional violence is not fully recognised by the law, so they aim to increase the profile within the legal system of the experience of bereavement. Indeed they are part of a wider movement, characterised by restitutive justice, aiming to reinsert the needs of victims into the criminal justice system.

Mutual help bereavement groups date in Britain from 1959, when The Compassionate Friends, a group for bereaved parents, was formed - about the same time that Cruse, the main modernist group providing support and counselling for widows and other mourners, was formed. More recently, the Internet has enabled mutual help groups to flourish online, potentially crossing borders and continents. If the face-to-face mutual help group comprises members detached from pre-existing networks of kinship, neighbourhood and work, the Internet group takes this detachment one step further. Information and experience are shared between individuals who are detached not only from their own families and neighbourhoods, but even from physically meeting.

The mass media enable another phenomenon, which might be termed virtual mourning. The news media create a very high profile for some deaths: the peaceful death of an already public figure (Belgium's King Baudouin in 1993, the UK's Queen Mother in 2002, Pope John Paul II in 2005); the violent death of ordinary members of the public (stadium and transport disasters, 9/11, the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami), especially if they are children (Holly and Jessica, two English 10-year-olds murdered by a paedophile employed by their school; the Columbine school shootings in Colorado); most of all the violent death of a celebrity or politician (political assassinations, Princess Diana). Since the 1990s, such deaths have led to massive public responses, expressed in millions of people travelling to view the body, witness the place of death, lay flowers, sign books of condolence, express condolence on the Internet, or participate in a ritual one minute or two minute silence (Walter 2001).

Clearly these virtual mourners are not bereaved like those who have lost close family members and are not incapacitated by their grief: they can still function at work and at home, they still enjoy seeing their friends. But a considerable number do in some way identify with the official mourners, or the death has touched them in some way. Since road traffic accidents can tear any young family apart, many mothers did indeed feel for Princess Diana's children William and Harry. Since many Westerners visit Thailand on holiday at Christmas, after the 2004 tsunami many of those who did not personally know anyone who had perished nevertheless felt for bereaved families whose stories were shown on television and in the newspaper. Charismatic leaders such as Pope John Paul II or King Baudouin who, over a long reign, had inspired loyalty to church or nation, were mourned by many who had only ever seen them on the television screen. Members of the public who came to lay flowers for Princess Diana or who attended the Pope's Requiem Mass, unlike official mourners, were not dressed in black but by their very presence they created the event, which was both a global media event and yet also rooted in

millions of people gathering physically together in one place. With both the Princess and the Pope, we remember the mourning as vividly as the death.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. The death in 1817 of Britain's much loved Princess Charlotte led to mass mourning - the media that communicated the news in this instance were newspapers and Sunday sermons. The death of the Duke of Wellington in 1852 produced a similar response (Wolffe 1999). The main difference now is that the media are instantaneous, global, reaching into every home. The telegraph, invented in the 19th century, was the first news medium that was both global and instantaneous, so it was then that the quantum leap forward was made, but we are now seeing the harvest in the form of a remarkable flourishing of virtual, mediated mourning.

What is happening here is a reversion, but within a postmodern context, to traditional mourning. If in the traditional village when the church bell tolls everyone knows that a villager has died and may well know which member has died, so in the global village when the news story breaks the entire globe knows. This is fundamentally different from modern mourning, where one family is immersed in a grief of which most of the rest of the street and certainly the rest of the city is ignorant. If traditional death brings a community together as Durkheim (1912) argued, and modern death isolates mourners from one another as Mellor and Shilling (1993) have argued, then postmodern media death powerfully symbolises a global, or at least partially global, community. When it comes to getting a whole world, or at least half a world, thinking and talking and even feeling the same thing at the same time, 9/11 and the Boxing Day tsunami trump even a World Cup soccer final or the first Sputnik launch.

In countries such as England where modern mourning means private mourning, this represents a surprise re-entry of mourning into the public sphere. It seems that some people who remain private about their grief for a personally known loved one have no hesitation going public in paying their respects to those they have known only through the television screen.

POSTMODERNISM (culture)

Postmodernism deconstructs the meta-narratives not only of traditional religion, but also of modernity. There is a loss of faith in, or at least ambivalence about, science, progress and the future; there is nostalgia for tradition and heritage; diversity is celebrated. No longer can priest or scientific expert tell us how to live, how to die, how to grieve. It all depends on personal choice, and on the community with which one identifies.

Just as modernism provided the cultural context in which twentieth century grief psychology was plausible, so postmodernism provides a plausibility structure for rather different kinds of grief psychology. The most important development here has been the realisation, by mourners themselves as much as by researchers, that not everyone lets go of the dead, and that many mourners walk into the future with, rather than without, the dead. In 1996 key research papers documenting this work were published under the title 'Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief' (Klass et al 1996; see also Walter 1996). It came to be understood that, even without cultural support as in Japan, western mourners found all kinds of ways of retaining the dead within their hearts, without getting 'stuck' in their grief.

This shift in the understanding of grief mirrors a shift in how we see architecture. Mid-century moderns knocked down Victorian houses, declaring them slums and jumping at the chance to move into brand-new homes; likewise they left their dead behind. Postmoderns, by contrast, restore their Victorian homes with relish, even while embracing the Internet and cheap air travel; likewise they embrace the future in the company of their dead.

This new paradigm is not deterministic: mourners do not have to continue their bonds with the dead; it all depends on the individual and their unique relationship with the deceased. Individuals develop specific styles of dealing with stress, reflected in unique ways of mourning (Stroebe et al 1992). As one commentator put it, people do not work through grief, grief works through the person. As in architecture, so in grief: it is up to you whether you abandon your Victorian house; it is up to you whether you abandon your dead.

Postmodernism is not only individualising - in the shape of multiculturalism it also celebrates communities and their discourses. I have already pointed to this in the discussion above on mutual help groups: universal 'stages' of grief are replaced not simply by diverse individual paths, but also by particular communities of feeling (Riches & Dawson 1996) in which particular types of mourners celebrate what they perceive to be an experience shared only by themselves. This reflects a multicultural society in which the culture of different ethnic, religious or sexual groups may be celebrated, rather than being subsumed into a dominant national culture.

One specific postmodern model of grief that has gained considerable attention among bereavement researchers and workers in the English speaking world is the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut 1999). This argues that mourners do indeed need to work through their painful feelings, but they also need to learn new skills and get on with life. Crucially, the two cannot be done at the same time, so mourners oscillate between being emotion focused and task focused. A significant feature of this model is that, being oscillatory in contrast to linear stage theories, it is impossible for it to become normative: no expert or well-meaning family member can tell the mourner what is 'normal' after, say, six months.

These developments raise an intriguing question (Walter 1999). All known societies have norms for grief, so is it possible for a situation to last long in which mourners are told they may mourn however they see fit? As noted above, this notion began in the late nineteenth century with women's emancipation and the modern concept of personal freedom, and has gathered considerable momentum with the postmodern celebration of diversity. If mourners continue to relish their personal liberty, in death as in life, then this will be a truly interesting cultural development. On the other hand, however, it might lead to anomie, in turn leading to the reintroduction, subtle or not so subtle, of new norms. Just as the normative vacuum left by the decline of Victorian social mourning was filled by modernist grief psychology, so the normative vacuum left by postmodernism may in turn be filled by new normative frameworks, yet to manifest themselves.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have sought to show how social structure, in the forms of modernity and postmodernity, illuminates to some extent why mourners feel and act as they do. In particular it illuminates why they may feel isolated, and the steps they take to find communion with others. I have also sought to show how culture, in the form of modernism and postmodernism, provides a

plausibility structure in which expert theories of grief are developed and interpreted for the wider public and then challenged. In so far as there is a trend from modern to postmodern, the analysis of both structure and culture highlights how and why the experience of grief, and the frameworks within which it is interpreted, are currently undergoing profound change.

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ⁱ Of course, not everyone in pre-industrial society lived in small villages. Ancient Rome had a population of one million.