

Grief and culture a check list

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Abstract: All groups have a culture. This article is intended to help the bereavement practitioner better understand the support needs of clients from other cultures. It sets out and explains a simple checklist of questions designed to explore cultural practices and attitudes to grief and bereavement. The questions cover the obligations mourners feel towards the dead and towards society; who should be mourned; what should be done with the dead; what should be done with emotions; the inclusion or exclusion of mourners from society, and the role of religion. Practitioners need to be aware of their own cultural assumptions about grief and bereavement, and to observe and listen to what the client is telling them.

Keywords: Grief, bereavement, culture, assumptions, emotions, religion

All groups, from families to entire societies, have a culture: a way of doing things and a set of norms about how things ought to be done. One of these things is grief. We all belong to groups that have norms for how we are expected to grieve (Walter 1999).

Most of the time, most people take their culture and its norms for granted. At times of conflict and change, however, people can become acutely aware of the divergence between norms. For example, the teenager may protest against his parents' values; a person migrates to another country and only then becomes aware both of their own values and of how very much they differ from those of the new country; a child dies and a husband and wife realise how very different their assumptions are about how to handle grief.

Much literature on bereavement seems to suppose that 'culture' is something other groups have. Many hospital wards in England routinely provide information to staff about the death and mourning rites of Hindus, Muslims, West Indians and people from the many other cultures in the locality, but rarely about the rites of the English or of Christianity (despite the fact that many health care workers are neither Christian nor ethnically English). Yet it is equally important for bereavement practitioners to be aware of their own cultural assumptions about grief. This is for two reasons:

- for immigrant clients, the problem is not usually their own cultural assumptions about grief but those of the host country, including possibly those of the practitioner
- practitioners have to be aware of and understand their own assumptions before being able to empower clients, whether or not they share the same culture.

It is impossible for bereavement practitioners to be well informed about the culture of every client. London's population, for example, contains probably around 200 ethnic cultures, to say nothing of all the youth and class subcultures. Moreover, any one culture, or religion, is much more complex and dynamic than a simple fact sheet can encompass. What is more important is that the practitioner:

- is aware of his or her own cultural assumptions about grief
- observes and listens in order to learn about the client's culture.

The trouble with fact sheets is that they fill your mind with information when, to be a skilled listener, you need to empty your mind. When Christine Valentine (2009) talked to Japanese people about bereavement, she found she had to clear her mind of all her assumptions about how people in Japan deal with grief in order to really listen to her interviewees. Even if your assumptions are correct about the culture in general, they may not be correct for this particular individual. And, although training in bereavement care teaches listening skills, it also fills the mind with models and theories of grief, and these models and theories are all western.

Though cultural factsheets and bereavement models have value if held very lightly, this article takes a different approach, offering instead a checklist of questions (see table). Every culture has to provide answers to some basic questions about death and bereavement. What should be done with the dead? Who should be mourned? What should mourners do with their emotions? How should mourners behave? The checklist in this article includes these kinds of questions. Going through the list systematically will help bereavement practitioners identify their own assumptions, and should be useful when starting work with a new cultural group. I do not recommend using the list systematically in this way when working with just one individual from another culture, although it can be useful to bear the questions in mind. The questions can also be useful in training; indeed, it is for training sessions that I developed and have used the list.

Cultural influence

Before explaining the checklist, I would like to offer a few brief but important observations about culture. First, individuals are shaped by their culture, but are not determined by it. Indeed, they may actively resist their culture: the man who wants to cry in a culture where 'big boys don't cry' is one example. Practitioners may need to understand both what the individual wants and what their culture expects; they may not be the same.

Second, religion is cultural, but religion is not culture; it interacts with culture (Garces-Foley, 2005). The funeral rites of Presbyterians in Aberdeen differ in many ways from those of Presbyterians in New York; the expression of emotion by grieving Muslims in Egypt is very different from that of grieving Muslims in Bali (Wikan, 1988). Pay attention to religion, but religion will not tell you everything about a culture's norms for grief and mourning.

The same is true of ethnicity. Ethnicity may be part of culture, but it is not everything. Irish people whose forebears migrated to the US may now be more American than Irish in their cultural assumptions. First, second and third generation migrants may have different levels of knowledge about what are deemed to be correct mourning

behaviours, and different views about whether the remains should be finally located in the old or the new country.

Finally, few cultures are homogenous. Among the ethnic English in England, there are class, regional, generational and gender variations in how funerals and grief should be handled. The check list is useful not only for exploring other cultures, but also for exploring differences, tensions and conflict within any one culture, including your own.

And so to the checklist.

[insert table around here]

Autonomy or connectedness?

Societies vary in the extent to which they emphasise the individual or the group (Hofstede, 1997). The US is at the individualist end of the spectrum, in that its culture places a high value on personal autonomy. This does not mean there is no sense of community in the US; far from it – American wakes can provide a focus for the entire community. But it does mean that North Americans tend to see grief as a journey during which the bereaved person detaches from their bonds with the deceased so they can once again become an autonomous individual capable of forming new relationships. ‘Closure’ is the goal. Such ideas are held in several other western countries. Moreover, the distinction between grief (what individuals feel) and mourning (socially expected behaviour) – a distinction made by many readers of this journal – presumes that individual and society may be separated: a presumption not found in all societies.

In collectivist societies, the individual barely exists outside of the group. Mourning entails the fulfilment of responsibilities to others, which continue beyond the grave, so responsibilities exist toward the dead. Death transforms, rather than severs, the relationship with the deceased who may be transformed, by the ritual actions of mourners, into an ancestor. A number of studies of mourning in Japan illustrate this kind of post-mortem connectedness (e.g. Smith 1974; Suzuki 1998).

So, the question to ask about connectedness versus autonomy is this:

What kind of talk predominates in the culture, and in the speech of the individual?

Do mourners speak of an obligation to care for the dead, an obligation about community responsibility, or an obligation to oneself, to look after one’s own psychological and emotional needs? Are funerals spoken of as a rite for releasing the soul, as a way to respect the dead, as a community requirement, or as an essential part of ‘the grief process’?

There may be collectivist elements within western countries. In the UK, for example, the war dead are collectively transformed into national ancestors. Bonds with the dead may continue both in popular culture (expressed, for example, in pop songs and gravestone inscriptions) and in the experience of many individual mourners. An English mourner, located in a culture that focuses on emotional health, may nevertheless be concerned to ‘look after’ the well-being of her deceased husband.

And in collectivist societies, there are always some individuals who have more individualistic experiences. Some Japanese mourners, living in a culture focused on the obligation to care for the dead, may still be concerned about their own emotional needs (Valentine 2009).

What to do with the dead?

Related to the autonomy/connectedness question are some others:

Should we let go of the dead, or continue to relate to them, or turn them into ancestors?

And if they need to be turned into ancestors:

Do mourners require access to a grave that may be on another continent, or even in enemy hands?

A further question is:

Should the dead should be left alone, or actively avoided, or actively contacted?

This last question can be contentious for those in the Judaic-Christian tradition, which forbids the use of mediums or otherwise contacting the dead, unless (in the Christian Orthodox and Catholic traditions) it be through prayer to the saints or to the once-dead but now-resurrected Christ. When I am teaching groups of trainee clergy, this is by far the most divisive question: some trainees reaffirm the doctrinal position that any use of mediums is wrong, others affirm a pastoral necessity to work with people however unorthodox their practices (cf. Walter, 2007).

Who should be mourned?

Goss and Klass (2005) describe how answers to this question in China have changed. In pre-Communist days, respect for the ancestors meant you could mourn only those senior to you: fathers yes, children no. This family ancestor cult was ruthlessly suppressed by the Maoist regime, which supplanted it with respect for the nation's sacred dead. Funerals were simple, with family no more important than workmates; only the funerals of important local or national party members (ultimately of Mao himself) were of any scale. Now, in a more capitalist China, people are reverting to family ancestors, but in a more egalitarian way, especially in Hong Kong (most influenced by the west) where there are widow support groups and families hold services for children who have died. This complexity and confusion of grief narratives for many modern Chinese is staggering. 'No one knows the old ritual, and no one believes in the old religions anymore, but the practices put in place by the Chinese Communist Party are discredited' (Goss & Klass, 2005, p202). And if a person then migrates to San Francisco or Melbourne, yet another set of norms is encountered: a confusing terrain for mourners to navigate.

Within western countries, norms about who should be mourned have similarly changed. In the 19th century, the well-to-do woman was expected to mourn the death of her husband's father for a longer period than the death of her own baby. Taylor (1983) has argued that such norms reflected a patriarchal society in which gender and

age predominated over personal feeling, and that this was overthrown in the 20th century when the idea developed – not without resistance – that the depth of mourning should reflect the unique relationship of mourner to deceased. It is only since the 1980s that this new norm has been extended to include stillbirths.

Even today this norm is not universal in western countries, where mourning for one specific group – the war dead – is seen to reflect not the individual mourner's depth of feeling but the nation's sense of debt. And this cultural requirement affects the individual. In Britain in 2009, some people choose to pay their respects to deceased soldiers returning from Afghanistan, even though they did not know them personally. Mourning is also widespread for leaders and celebrities, such as Princess Diana or Michael Jackson, despite lack of personal acquaintance. That the authenticity of mourning celebrities is hotly debated indicates dissensus over the limits of private grief: mourning a soldier you didn't know personally may be fine, but maybe not a celebrity you didn't know (Walter, 2008).

So, to make the question more concrete:

Who should be mourned – the sacred dead who legitimise a state (or a religion); family ancestors (often male, and older) who legitimate the family, seniority or patriarchy; celebrities who are key to many people's sense of identity; or personal intimates who legitimate the primacy of emotional attachment?

Goss and Klass (2005) show how, when one of these answers has powerful backers, a cultural narrative is formed within which personal grief narratives are expected to fit. And yet, as with our first question, what culture requires and what the individual wants or needs may conflict.

Emotion

So, our next question is:

What should mourners do with their emotions? Should emotions be expressed or contained? And where and when should they be expressed, or contained?

In some western countries, mourners are expected to keep their emotions under control in most social settings, including when with their own families, but it is acceptable to grieve in private, and this may be extended to include the privacy of the counselling session. In some societies, the lament provides a structured vehicle for the expression of pain, usually by women, often only within the context of the funeral. A number of religions – for example, Islam – limit the expression of grief to just the first few days following the death, for fear that the attachments of the living will hinder the soul from proceeding on its journey, although the extent to which this injunction is accepted varies between Islamic countries (Wikan, 1988).

Within any one society, norms about emotional expression are likely to change over time (Simonds & Rothman, 1992) and to differ between genders. In addition, different norms may be embraced by different social classes, or age groups (for example, stoical veterans of the Second World War versus more expressive baby boomers).

Role of mourners

The first question asked about social integration, or lack of it, between the living and the dead. There is also the question of whether or not mourners should remain integrated with the rest of society.

Should mourners be ritually excluded from everyday life?

This was the case with upper class Victorian females, who were not permitted to attend social events for the specified period of mourning.

Or should mourners be socially excluded in an unritualised way?

This seems to have occurred in the UK, for example, as the traditional formal rules of mourning have withered, and society in general seems to find it hard to be alongside those who have experienced a bereavement.

Or should mourners be socially included?

Social inclusion seems to be the advice of western pundits who criticise the way bereaved people are ostracised like lepers. And, of course, for poor people throughout the world, continuing social participation is an absolute necessity: bereavement typically leads to more economic pressure to go out and earn a living and/or look after the children and (notably, in AIDS- stricken sub-Saharan Africa) grandchildren.

Belief systems

Every culture entails a belief system or systems, which may or may not be religious. Loss may find a place at the core of some belief systems, but struggle even to be acknowledged in others. Loss is at the heart of Buddhism's notions of impermanence and the inevitability of suffering. Christianity posits a deity who suffers alongside humanity. Rationalism accepts mortality. But the 'secular religion' of happiness, youth and health that dominates some secular western societies marginalises old age, decay, death, loss and suffering. So, the final question is:

Does religion, or other dominant belief system, normalise or pathologise loss and suffering? Does the mourner's story find a place within dominant cultural narratives?

Mainstream US culture promotes happiness, progress and the future, marginalising narratives of loss: both personal loss and the communal historical loss that pervades native American and ex-slave African American historical experience (although the latter found musical expression in spirituals and the blues). Likewise, the idea of Australia as the 'lucky' country marginalises the far from lucky experiences of Aboriginal Australians as a collective group, and the personal experiences of many individuals facing loss. Other societies bring historical loss into mainstream culture. Portugal, for example, seems to have been mourning the end of its golden age for several centuries, resulting in a culture of nostalgia expressed in its characteristic *fado* singing. Societies can provide very different contexts in which to grieve.

For any individual, there is a further question about religion.

Does religion support, oppress, or marginalise mourners?

There is some evidence, for example, that North American churches often provide a supportive community for grieving individuals, but that struggling British churches often marginalise the elderly mourner, who then faces a double loss: not only of the person who has died but also of the church and even the god in whom they once trusted (Coleman et al, 2004). In the UK, some Jews and Hindus who are otherwise secular engage in traditional religious mourning rituals because they value the structured roles and social support provided.

Conclusion

The key to cross-cultural understanding of grief is to ask questions, and for these questions to inform the bereavement practitioner's listening and observing. The questions can profitably be asked not only of others' cultures, but also of your own culture and your own personal assumptions. There may be divergences between your personal assumptions about grief, the assumptions of your culture, the assumptions of your client, and the assumptions of your client's culture, so cross-cultural bereavement care needs to identify any such divergences. This article offers a first attempt at listing the most productive questions to ask, or at least to bear in mind as you work with bereaved people from other cultures. The answers may often be more complex than the questions, but they can be good questions to ask.

Table 1: A cultural checklist

- 1a What is most valued:
 - connectedness?
 - autonomy?

- 1b What obligations are felt:
 - to care for the dead?
 - to fulfil community responsibilities?
 - to work through grief?

- 2a What to do with the dead:
 - let go of them?
 - continue bonds with them?
 - turn them into ancestors?

- 2b Should the dead be:
 - left alone?
 - avoided?
 - contacted?

- 3 Who should be mourned:
 - the sacred dead?
 - family ancestors?
 - personal intimates?

- 4 What to do with emotions:
 - express them?
 - contain them?

- 5 Should mourners be:
 - ritually excluded from everyday life?
 - socially included?
 - socially excluded?

- 6 Does religion or other belief system:
 - normalise or pathologise loss?
 - provide a place for stories of mourning?
 - support mourners?
 - oppress mourners?
 - marginalise mourners?

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