

# Bereavement research: an overview

Caroline Pearce, Palliative and End of Life Care Research Group, University of Cambridge

## 1. Overview of academic study of grief and bereavement

## 2. Insights from my research into bereavement

- PhD study (The Open University) examining recovery from grief following bereavement. Qualitative study interviewed bereaved people and bereavement counsellors/support workers
- Current research reviewing literature on 'complicated' and 'prolonged' forms of grief and role of primary care in supporting bereaved people



# Identifying grief as a psychological process

## **Sigmund Freud: Mourning and Melancholia (1917)**

- Described the process of mourning
- Coming to terms with the parts of ourselves that we have lost with the person who died
- Interpretations of Freud perpetuated view that successful mourning is about 'detaching' or 'letting go' of the deceased person

## **John Bowlby (1979, 1980) and Colin Murray Parkes (1972, 2006)**

- Grief is a separation response – universal and biological response
- How people cope with bereavement is largely determined by experience of separation from their primary caregiver as a child, drawing on attachment theory
- Four phases of grief in adults: 'numbness', 'yearning, searching and anger', 'disorganisation and despair' and 'reorganisation'

# The five stages: time to relegate to the shelves of history

## **Kubler Ross (1970) Stage model**

- Five stages of dying that were borrowed and applied to the grief process: 'denial', 'anger', 'bargaining', 'depression', and 'acceptance'

## **Worden (1982) Tasks of grieving**

- Four tasks the bereaved person was to accomplish in order to successfully resolve his or her grief

## **Criticisms of stage models of grief**

- Stroebe et al. (2017) – stages should be relegated to the shelves of history
- Discredited – still in popular discourse and still gets taught to practitioners – no empirical evidence to support this
- Some people find it helpful but for most provides an unhelpful measure to compare oneself that doesn't reflect the reality of grief

# Contemporary theories

## **Continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996)**

- Argued it is normative for mourners to maintain a presence and connection with the deceased
- Counter ideas that severing ties was the only way to resolve grief.
- People maintain a relationship through formal and informal rituals, honouring anniversaries, visiting graves, keeping belongings, looking at photographs etc

## **Dual process model (Stroebe and Schut 1999)**

- Challenging idea that grief is linear, people oscillate between focusing on loss and focusing on restoring sense of self

**Sociological perspectives:** narratives, meaning-making, non-western perspectives

**Complicated grief:** Research on the minority of bereaved people that experience 'complicated' or 'prolonged' forms of grief that are defined as psychiatric disorders

# Intersections between bereavement and loneliness

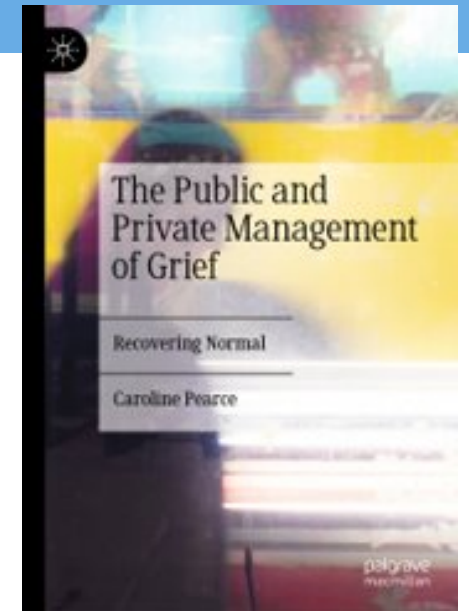
Loneliness as the experience of absence. When bereaved people are defined by what they have lost

Grief and loneliness both raise existential questions but are also social and political issues

- Extracts from interviews of three participants: Paul, John and Rose
- PhD research (The Open University, 2016) Examining the notion of recovery from grief following bereavement

Relevant findings:

- Grief can be exacerbated by social isolation, feeling not understood by others and people distancing themselves from the grieving person
- The experience of loneliness was particularly present for those who had lost a long term partner, and who may have also been a carer
- Some people might not feel alone as they still feel presence of deceased person



"I make sure I get out the house because I've got the dogs and the cat ...So I get out and as soon as a I get out to the shops and see people, most of the shopkeepers in the places I go to they all know me cos I'm chatty, I'm that sort of person.

It's just the day-to-day loneliness, the minute by minute loneliness when there's no one to talk to. Nobody here, nothing to share with, just the general loneliness, just being on your own. I don't mind my own company, I never have done. I've never been, never particularly been bored in my life, cos I got too many outlets, I got too many things to do, ... I've got too many things, diversions to worry about

...it's the general lack of, not companionship, that's probably too much of a hackneyed word I think but its yeah, the involvement and having somebody there that you've lived with, and you know exactly who what why and where do you know? And when they're not there is just something very hard to deal with."

**Paul (64) wife died after a long illness**



"Going home is the worst thing really. Because that's like you open the door and you, and no matter what happens you expect her to be there, and she's not. But I find that hard even if I'm going down the shops or whatever. It's very hard going home. Find it very difficult

...One of my problems is that, I'd, my future basically was, was with my wife. That's the only thing I'd ever thought about really that we'd sort of be living together until old age and sitting in front of a fire all that sort of thing, reading the paper or something, that things would, that that would be my future. ... and that's probably part and parcel of the trouble I've got, trying to come to some sort of resolution as to what my future is now, in that I always saw my future as being with her.

I'll devote more time to my grandchildren. And the boys. And that's probably what will take, take her place in effect. That's what's taken her place up to now, in the last few months, well certainly since she passed away... And probably take up, take up golf a bit more seriously, get interested in bowls or something do some old man sports."

**John (63) Wife died following sudden illness**



*I: You mentioned in your letter that you haven't really grieved, is that because as you say your husband is still with you?*

**Rose:** "It's because he's with me ... I thought oh god I've got to do a wake here, I got to do a funeral on Friday, I mean he was the one who did all of the social stuff...I just felt his presence there and it just says, don't worry we'll cope with it I'm with you as long as you want me. And that's basically been it."

*I: Did you ever have any desire to have a partner?*

**Rose:** "No! No as I say, he's company enough quite honestly if I want to talk to anyone I can sit there and I know his reactions to conversations so much so I know exactly how he would answer things. So sometimes I would come home upset and I would go (Husbands name) what do I do now and I feel him just say right okay, we'd sit down lets go through what is the problem and I would hear his thoughts...

It feels as if we're still together. Which is why I'm not really interested in anyone else."

**Rose (63) Husband died suddenly – Interviewed 26 years since bereavement**

# Final thoughts

- The continued presence of the deceased person can act as a comfort to the bereaved person and ease feelings of loneliness
- Grief and loneliness both raise existential questions but are also social and political issues
- Whose responsibility is it to help people in bereavement – Practitioners believe ‘social support’ rather than professional intervention is appropriate to manage grief but bereaved people often feel isolated, even when they strive to keep socially active

**COVID-19 and bereavement:** bereavement at the best of times can be a socially isolating experience

- The experience of grieving alone: dying alone is often feared but grieving alone might be even more painful
- The type of social practices and rituals that might aid bereaved people are now restricted
- People are in a 'liminal' space, feeling 'stuck' in grief
- Those bereaved of non-COVID causes could potentially feel more isolated, their grief unacknowledged