

# Journals in the field of death studies and bereavement. Where does *Bereavement Care* fit in?



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**Abstract:** As this issue celebrates 60 years since the founding of Cruse, it is timely to review *Bereavement Care*, an important element in the development of the organisation, in the context of other journals with similar aims. The background to the publication of *Bereavement Care* will be presented together with journals that contain a similar subject coverage. The way the journals are organised will be briefly explored as well as some of their most cited and the most-read papers. Commentary on the latest issue of these journals will be provided along with reflection on other sources of bereavement literature. Some suggestions for future topics are also included.

## Introduction

As readers are probably aware, *Bereavement Care* was first published in 1982 as a complement to the work of Cruse and is still published in association with the organisation today. Cruse itself was founded in the UK in 1959 by Margaret Torrie who had identified that the needs of widows had been ignored by society, first because of practical issues such as a reduction in finances after the death of a husband, and second because of taking on new household tasks and coping with living alone (Cartwright, 1982). Counselling, as part of Cruse's mission, came later as did helping people through other types of bereavement, for example bereaved children.

Since its origins Cruse has become the largest bereavement association in the UK and remains influential as a national organisation with almost 100 branches across the UK and 5,000 volunteers. (Cruse, 2019). Other national organisations now also support bereaved people, for example ones for particular age groups and for different types of death and many are listed on the Useful Links page of the Cruse website (Cruse, 2019).

This journal is of some relevance to all of these organisations as well as to specialists in bereavement

support in its varied forms and to academics. The first issue of *Bereavement Care* contained just eight pages with three issues a year. It was a fledgling start to a more sophisticated journal that now contains around 150 pages in each annual volume. It had a very specific purpose and remains a focused journal based on its original aims – for all who help the bereaved. The first issue stated that the growth of Cruse made the publication essential – so that everyone in Cruse might know the workings of the different branches and learn from them, but also so that articles from experts on counselling, specifically bereavement counselling, might be made available to volunteers and integrated into their training and development. To appeal to a wider audience it could also be purchased externally to the organisation.

Despite its small size the first issue contained a great variety of information – an article on suicide prevention, a short history of Cruse, a letters section, diary of events, and a media review. Immediately it had a potential readership of 2,000 people, the number of volunteers in Cruse at the time. One of its very useful features has been to request authors to write on key issues of their research and study such as disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999), complicated grief (Prigerson, 2004) and models of grief (Hall, 2014).

It has been edited (sometimes in conjunction with others) by Colin Murray Parkes OBE, since its inception.

It had funding from a UK body – King Edward VII Hospital Fund – and is the only journal to have a mandate from the government of the country in which it is published. The Secretary of State for Health at the time wrote a welcome letter to the launch of the journal which was inserted in all copies. It recognised the importance of the work of Cruse, the value of a journal in assisting with training of volunteers and staff, discussing developments within the organisation and providing a forum for dialogue and comment.

### Journals with similar aims

While *Bereavement Care* had a specific focus on bereavement *per se*, there are other journals relevant to the topic. The first was *Omega* published in 1970 in association with two US universities who had set up departments focusing on death studies. While the introduction indicated it was primarily aimed at those involved in psychology, psychiatry and other health professions, it also encouraged contributions from ‘theologians, political scientists, art historians, librarians, musicologists, biochemists, police administrators – and any and all others who can add a meaningful increment to knowledge and understanding’ (Kalish, 1970, p. 2). Nor did it leave out bereaved people as authors and readers. To illustrate the huge range of topics in this field, the first issue contained an article on ‘Assumptions of war and the nature of man’ (Le Shan, 1970) and what would have seemed almost unimaginable in 1970, an article in the most recent issue is on ‘Soldiers’ preferences regarding sperm preservation, posthumous reproduction, and attributes of a potential “posthumous mother”’ (Bokek-Cohen & Ravitsky, 2019). Its editor of many years is Kenneth J Doka. *Omega* has two unusual features as a journal: a) its eight issues a year comprise issues from three volumes and always has two years on its cover (2018–19 as an example); b) there is another journal called *Omega* which covers management issues.

*Death Education* (to become *Death Studies* in 1985) was first published in 1977. Like *Omega* and most of the other journals cited in this article, it had its roots in an academic department and initially this was with a department of gerontological studies in the US. The editor, Hannelor Wass, noted there were many people working in this area but there was ‘no unifying approach’ so that it could become an identifiable interdisciplinary field (Wass, 1977, p. 1). It has gradually broadened its aims to encompass death studies, taking this as its title from 1985. The development of death education and the publication patterns in the journal *Death Studies* is well documented in a *festschrift* to Wass in *Death Studies* (2015, v39, whole issue). From reviewing the content of both *Omega* and *Death Studies* over their years of publication, there are great similarities between them

but there is room for both as evidenced by the amount and variety of material in each of them. The editor of *Death Studies* for many years has been Robert Neimeyer.

*Mortality* is a UK journal on death studies, first published in 1996. In the editorial of the first issue (Howarth & Jupp, 1996), the authors wrote that the impetus for its inception was the ‘range and depth of new research being undertaken into issues around mortality’. It further widened the parameters of the above two journals. Explicit examples of the mention of new disciplines included socio-legal studies and archaeology. What is also different is that they especially welcomed articles which drew on qualitative methods and discursive styles. In this they have been successful. Like *Omega* and *Death Studies*, they continue to draw impetus from an academic department of death studies at a university – in this case the University of Bath, UK. Its current editors are Arnar Arnason and Kate Woodthorpe.

*Grief Matters* is an Australian journal published by the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (formerly known as the Centre for Grief Education). The first publication was in 1998. The then editor Beverly Raphael (1998), while not excluding international contributions, indicated Australian writers had privilege over writers from outside Australia. It is similar to *Bereavement Care* in size and approach although it has more themed issues. There is an editorial in most editions and both research and clinical interventions are regularly part of its output. For instance, the first issue highlighted synopses of research by various Australian authors. On the other hand, one of the most recent issues comprised three articles on the vital role that social work plays in bereavement support. This issue was well-referenced but not based on specific research.

There are two current journals that go beyond death studies though they both explicitly include issues of bereavement and loss. The first, *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, started publication in 1996 in a department of psychology in a US university and was previously titled *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss* (1996–2000). The editor-in-chief has been John J Harvey from 1996 to today. In the first edition, he wrote about some of his personal and professional work around the ‘pervasiveness’ of loss and its ‘omnipresence’ in our lives (Harvey, 1996, pp. iv, iii). Interestingly he never mentioned bereavement *per se*. He acknowledged the support of the editor of *Death Studies*, Robert Neimeyer, in his decision to publish the journal. The second journal is *Illness, Crisis and Loss* (current editor Jason L Powell from Chester University, UK) which has had a number of editors over the years. While there is no evidence of an editorial in its first issue, the contents of that initial issue indicated that it covered similar topics to the other journals mentioned with more emphasis on illness and loss – in that first issue, AIDS and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

One other journal has specified 'loss' in its title and is obviously relevant when one reads the titles of the articles. Its first issue appears to contain no editorial. It was published intermittently from 1987–2001. This is *Loss, Grief and Care* and can be found within the website of the *Journal of Social Work in End-of-Life & Palliative Care*.

There is a crossover between people writing for the different journals and this includes some editors who write articles for their own as well as these other journals.

### A few numerical contrasts

**Size:** Nearly all the journals have increased in size but the biggest change has been with *Death Studies*. In 1970 it had four issues a year with about 400 pages. It now has 10 issues a year with around 650 pages annually. It may seem like the issues are smaller but as it has gone from A5 size to A4 size this, rather than a reduction in the number of words, may account for the smaller number of pages. At the other end of the spectrum, *Bereavement Care* started out with eight pages an issue and now has about 150 pages annually in its three issues.

**Editorial board:** The criteria for what constitutes an ideal number on an editorial board is not definitive. However, Springer (2019) suggests that the important issue is that board members must be 'peers whose judgement is highly regarded within the journal's main discipline'. Other criteria are the extent to which the editorial board promote the journal. In the list of journals above, the biggest editorial board is that of *Journal of Loss and Trauma* with 71 members while five others have between 27 and 33 members. *Bereavement Care* has nine members and *Grief Matters* has five, though they made it clear that they have a specifically Australian remit and all on their editorial board are from that region. Editorial board members can differ in their role in terms of their involvement with the journal and some journals also have additional lists of experts in other roles such as advisory editors or book review editors.

**Impact factor:** In academia, an impact factor is used to ascertain the importance of a journal and, simply explained, it refers to the number of times a journal article is cited by writers in other journals. In the last few years *Omega* has a journal impact of 1.127, *Death Studies* 1.160 and *Journal of Loss and Trauma* .0789 (accessed 20 June 2019). *Mortality* does not publish an impact factor. As a comparison, the *British Medical Journal* has an impact factor of 27.604. So bereavement journals, being a specialist niche, do not rate highly as academic journals although it does not deter from their utility for those working in the field of death studies, loss and bereavement. What it does mean though is that some academics may prefer their articles to be published in a journal with a higher impact factor rather than submitting to the journals cited in this article.

### Indexes

The journals described above are indexed on a variety of databases that cite the contents of major journals. These are known as bibliographical databases and/or citation indexes. Three internationally renowned databases are made available to all clinical staff in the NHS in the UK (NICE, 2019) – PubMed (also known as Medline), CINAHL (Cumulated Index to Nursing and Allied Health literature) and PsychInfo – covering medical, nursing and psychological literature respectively. These are regarded as core to searching literature on any issue related to health. The journals above were examined in relation to these three indexes. *Grief Matters* was not indexed in any of them but is indexed in various Australian publications. *Bereavement Care* was indexed only in CINAHL. *Death Studies* was indexed on all three and the remaining journals were indexed on CINAHL and PsychInfo. In summary, all the journals apart from *Grief Matters* are indexed on CINAHL which means this is the best database for finding articles from death studies/bereavement journals.

### Specialist journals and bereavement knowledge

These journals are only one source of knowledge. There are many books on the subject and chapters within edited books that are relevant to our knowledge of bereavement. In addition there is a vast amount of material on websites and social media. It could also be argued that other journals are just as relevant. A great number of factors surrounding reactions to bereavement are about attachment and *Attachment and Human Development* ([www.tandfonline.com/loi/rahd20](http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rahd20)) could be considered highly relevant though bereavement as a concept is not often specifically mentioned. Palliative care journals – of which there are about 10 – could also have been included as they consistently encompass issues of loss in terms of illness and facing death, though there is rarely consistency in the way the articles on bereavement are published. This illustrates an important point: that there is much more material on bereavement in sources other than the specialist journals although the specialism can be defined more closely by the topics covered in these journals.

### What goes around comes around

One of the interesting aspects of having journals online is that you can now see which articles have been most read and most cited in any journal (with varied parameters on different e-platforms for the time periods involved in this). I explored this feature with the six journals easily available online. The majority of the most read and most cited articles are on models of grief. In *Omega*, the most read and the most cited article is on the importance of ensuring the stages of grief model should be abandoned within the academic,

clinical and supportive aspects of bereavement work (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2017). In *Death Studies* the most cited and the most read article is on the dual model process of bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In *Bereavement Care* the most read article is on a synthesis of different models of grief (Hall, 2014) and the most cited is on an aspect of continuing bonds (Kasket, 2012). In *Mortality*, a new model of grief is the most cited (Walter, 1996).

The popularity of debating models of bereavement in all of these papers cannot be overstated. Almost all are critical of the stage model of grief, which largely goes back to the work of the author Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in the book *On death and dying* first published in 1969 and reviewed in the first issue of *Omega* (Fulton, 1970). In his review Fulton commends the book because it listens to the voice of the patient. Certainly, it is salutary to read a positive account of the model when first published, although some limitations were recognised even then.

Debunking the myth that the stage approach is helpful – as that seems an element in the goal of some of the above papers – requires orchestration, not just in bereavement journals but also in international marketing. As it has ‘stuck’ in industrialised society’s consciousness maybe it needs to be considered more carefully and examined for the elements that resonate with some bereaved people. On another level, if established experts on bereavement could persuade Google to provide a layperson’s description of models and theories of bereavement and it could remain as the most highly ranked item on the subject in Google, then the vast amount of bereaved people – as well as practitioners, academics and other interested in bereavement – would be better informed and have a better base from which to understand the subject, from both a personal and an objective standpoint. How to go about this in detail would make an interesting article in itself!

## Major changes to journals since 1970

Of course the biggest change in journals over the last 20 years is that they are now nearly all published online as well as in print. (The journals above are still in both formats). Only one journal is not published on the platform of a major e-publisher (*Grief Matters*). All were started, as described above, by smaller publishers or published in-house by an organisation associated with them. The work that continues in choosing and preparing the content is done by editors and affiliated staff in organisations or universities usually still associated with bereavement or death studies. However, the actual publication process is managed by a commercial publisher. In the case of *Bereavement Care*, *Death Studies*, *Journal of Loss and Trauma* and *Mortality* the publisher is Taylor and Francis and they are complementary to each other. The other two journals, *Omega* and *Illness, Crisis and Loss* are on the Sage e-platform.

It might seem a great advantage to have these journals online and for most academics who can access a university library, it is indeed a great facility. This is not the same for individuals unaffiliated to academic institutions, for example practitioners or those working freelance. There is thus a significant divide between practice and research in terms of these journals and their accessibility. On a very practical note, it is useful that any individual subscriber to a journal buys it in print as well as online as an enduring copy – in effect, the online portion is normally a lease as one only has access to it when a subscription is active. However any one can register on a journal website for the contents list of any of these journal to be emailed to them when it is first published.

Yet buying individual journal articles from a journal website can be costly. It would be helpful if publishers and/or academic or specialist libraries could provide full access, on a short-term basis and for a minimal charge, to people/organisations that are not affiliated to academic or specialist institutions. This is rarely available due to commercial or copyright reasons. Nevertheless occasional articles are available free of charge via journal websites. It is worth exploring these as well as ResearchGate (ResearchGate, 2019), libraries in the work place (including access via NICE (NICE, 2019) for NHS and hospice personnel in the UK) and public libraries, in the hope (but not the certainty) of obtaining the full text of articles you would like to read but in a journal to which you do not have a subscription.

## The structure of journals

The enthusiasm for a diverse range of writing in these journals was evident in the first editorials. In *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, Harvey wanted to be ‘open to different ... kinds of articles and methods’ (1996, p. vii). In *Omega* Kalish stated, ‘We intend to publish personal statements, literature reviews, blue sky speculations and descriptions of programmes. We might even publish a poem, a television script ...’ (1970, p. 2).

Viewing journal websites in June 2019, *Bereavement Care* had the most diverse range of genres – an editorial, a personal account of bereavement, two types of literature review, two book reviews, three articles containing original research and a description of an audio archive useful for bereaved parents. *Mortality* comprised a range of essays and research articles as well as a number of book reviews. *Grief Matters* contained a report of key presentations at an international conference in Australia. *Death Studies* only consisted of research articles, *Omega* had research studies and two book reviews. *Illness, Crisis and Loss* contained three research studies and one description of an intervention with a case study. *Journal of Loss and Trauma* had three research articles and a description of a narrative intervention as well as one book review.



Today, in contrast to having a range of genres of writing, these journals are sometimes more like a list of (mainly research) articles that could sit on their own, in any of the journals listed. In the most recent issues, no journal had an editorial apart from *Bereavement Care* (Ribbens McCarthy, 2019). This editorial is especially useful in that it highlights the range of types of evidence in this issue even though it is not all at the highest ranked level of research. A range of evidence, including different genres of writing in a journal is, I would argue, appropriate to the understanding of bereavement and death studies for both academics and practitioners. I would also suggest a journal needs some kind of character and the linking mechanism of an editorial achieves this. However, despite not being a regular occurrence in each issue, editorials form a regular component of most themed issues, a regular feature of many these journals, though not of *Bereavement Care*.

It is good to see book reviews retained as part of most journal contents. They allow writers to express themselves more easily than in the more formal setting of an article. They keep readers abreast of key new publications. Letters sections seem to have almost vanished, but there is one example in a recent issue of *Omega* in a robust exchange between Stroebe et al and Jurecic related to the stages of grief theory (Jurecic, Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2017). Such continuity is welcome as readers are likely to think more about a subject if someone critiques what has been written in a previous issue. Some readers might say that social media may be more appropriate for comments and opinions but I would argue they are more powerful if forming part of the journal itself.

## Comments and contrasts

There are 31 articles in the most recent issues of the journals cited here (not *Grief Matters* as it could not be traced).

Some complement each other as, for example, a personal account of the bodily aspects of grief in *Bereavement Care* (Gilmour, 2019) and an academic one in *Mortality* on the embedded nature of bodily grief (Brinkmann, 2019). This is unusual rather than typical. Even if the principle topic is the same, apparently similar topics are not easily comparable; for example, in *Death Studies* one on suicide contagion in a survey of over 2,000 university students in Turkey (Yildiz, Orak, Walker, & Solakoglu, 2019) and another on stigma and suicide survivors in Germany (Oexle et al., 2019). The issue of contagion and stigma come from very different contexts and methodological traditions, with the article on stigma consisting of interviews with 13 people who survived after a suicide attempt, not people who have survived the death from suicide of someone close to them. This illustrates some of the complexity of trying to categorise topics within death studies and bereavement, even though they might at first appear similar.

In all the journals, few interventions were described or assessed and despite the fact they came from 15 countries, there was little feeling of diversity in reading them. The most surprising finding was that six articles in different journals emanated from Turkey and they contained a significant amount of quantitative research. The article from Turkey in *Illness, Crisis and Loss* (Ahmadi, Ahmadi, Erbil, & Centrez, 2019) was a little different. It was based on RCOPE, an American psychometric measure of religious meaning-making in cancer. Although the authors' conclusion was that it was clear that culture plays an essential role in the choice of coping method, and the importance of the idea of being tolerant (sabr) for patients when coping with cancer, it did not strike me as being culturally specific to Turkey but as chiming with attitudes to cancer that one frequently encounters here in the UK.

One of the most unusual articles from *Mortality* was a piece of ethnographic research in a nursing home in Switzerland (Ammann, Rauber, & Gross, 2019). It dealt with diversity – “Doing death” the Mediterranean way; life in a segregated nursing home’. It fits with a stereotype of Switzerland being a very orderly society. The answer to dealing with diversity in one nursing home was to have a separate ward for patients from Mediterranean countries. Segregation might seem at first to be anathema to diversity but it seems that, in this instance at least and for the time being, it had an impact beyond this special ward in the nursing home, enabling staff to think more flexibly in other part of the organisation on issues of difference. How it progresses would be illuminating.

The description of the two articles above illustrates contrasting approaches to diversity, much like the two articles on suicide. Neither are easily comparable to each other and show the immense range of material that can be included under the banner of death studies.

## Final words

So death studies is a broad inter-disciplinary subject – not dissimilar to having an inter-disciplinary study called life studies because it is ubiquitous in its reach. Most of the journals cited here have bereavement as part, but not the main, focus of their objectives. *Bereavement Care* has synergy with all the journals mentioned in this article, with its unique feature being the use of more varied genres of writing than most other journals and with a conscious aim to be accessible to a wide range and level of readership. Most importantly it has, with *Grief Matters*, a strong focus on the subject of bereavement *per se*, more than the other journals. It continues educating those who have a remit to support bereaved people, in whatever capacity.

I have some suggestions for articles in all these journals. Two recent articles highlight the great variety of interventions in bereavement and, by implication, the paucity of research or systematic treatment on

these (Thompson, Whiteman, Loucks, & Daudt, 2017; Cartwright, 2019). They are by practitioners searching for ways to validate bereavement interventions and finding that a great array of them are not extensively researched in relation to bereavement. Ideally debate on these varied approaches to achieving effective outcomes for bereaved people needs to be more at the forefront of thinking about bereavement interventions. Case studies using a methodological approach is one way of assisting in this and a good example is an article on relating a client's problems to the dual process model of grief (Hunt, 2004) and another case study can be found embedded in a research project (Rolls, 2010). A related area to explore is participation of participants in the write-up of research and whether the standardised assumption of anonymity is always appropriate (Borgstrom & Ellis, 2017) In addition, this would also appear to be an issue related to the participation of clients in service development. There is also room for more research and comment on the evolving role of volunteers in bereavement. My final suggestion is that a discussion continues to take place on how to involve more practitioners in writing for journals. It has always been present but needs to be continuously addressed.

In reading these journals, it is important to acknowledge the vision of the original and current editors. Their energy and commitment is obvious in initial editorials and every issue still brings interesting and original material to enlarge one's own perspective, whether it be as a practitioner or as an academic, some readers being both. These journals provide a barometer for what is taking place in the field of death studies, loss and bereavement. Yet they all illustrate slightly different viewpoints as well as different styles and genres of writing. Practitioners and researchers owe a great deal to them. ■

## Journal websites

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