Bereavement, race and Culture

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Bereavement is an inescapable aspect of our human existence, but our specific concern here is to highlight the truth that the various races and cultures handle it differently. It is important for people within culturally plural societies who would counsel or befriend bereaved individuals to be aware that such differences exist.

TAKING ETHNICITY AND CULTURE SERIOUSLY

Bereavement counsellors in the UK are increasingly being advised to learn as much as they can about how the various cultural constituents cope with bereavement and in the USA some serious attention is being paid to this issue. In a book produced by the Committee for the Study of Health Consequences of the Stress of Bereavement,[1] a chapter is devoted to sociocultural influences on bereavement where some interesting finds are recorded. On mourning rituals, it stated:

Anthropologic findings suggest that the personal experience of grief, like the public articulation of mourning, may be quite distinctive in different social settings. Puerto Rican bereaved women are expected to express their sorrow dramatically through displays of seizure-like attacks and uncontrollable emotions. Various south-east Asian/ American groups participate in public displays of wailing and open expression of sad emotion, but in private are expected to be contained and stoical, demonstrating their endurance and forbearance in the face of life's tragedies. Traditionally oriented Greek and Portuguese widows are expected to enact a lifetime role of grieving in which they demonstrate loyalty to the memory of the dead. In contrast, grief among middle class, college-educated Americans is increasingly regarded as an acute transitory stage, to be gotten through as quickly as possible with successful outcome measured in terms of developing new relations and giving up ties to the dead. Compare this with the no longer practised but still deeply respected Hindu and Balinese traditions of ritual suicide of the wife on the funeral pyre of the dead husband as a sign of loyalty to the lasting commitments of marriage.

The Committee is aware of the need for serious attention to be paid to how bereavement affects people of different races and cultures. A quote from the final paragraph in the chapter referred to above will suffice:

Research is needed on the various grieving experiences of ethnic group members to determine cultural norms of grieving and to lay the groundwork for determining pathology. High priority should also be given to research on the potentially greater risk for negative health consequences of bereavement among refugees, recent immigrants, and ethnic group members who experience social marginality and economic deprivation. In planning and conducting research in such communities, group members should be involved in the research process to determine risks and to plan culturally appropriate preventive and therapeutic interventions.

Every culture has its unique way of handling death. Sometimes a religion will dictate what must be done when one of their believers dies. For example Hinduism, Islam and Judaism all seem to have restrictions as to who should actually handle the dead body. Usually the preference is to allow only members of their respective faiths to touch the corpse. At the funeral ceremony of Sikhs and also of Caribbean persons of whatever religion, it is customary to have an open coffin where the body of the deceased is displayed. Then too, within different races and cultures, there are directives regarding the eventual disposal of the body. Hindus opt for cremation, whereas Muslims prefer burial. Members of the Islamic faith now resident in Britain speak of the severe stress that bereaved families experience because it is not always possible to adhere strictly to the religion's stipulations. Sometimes their dead have to be flown back 'home' for proper burial—a very expensive undertaking.

In Britain, to get an overall picture of how bereavement is dealt

EDITOR'S NOTE

Counsellors are often deterred from offering help to bereaved people from other races and religions for fear that their ignorance of the customs and beliefs of the bereaved will make it impossible to communicate effectively with them. This assumption is challenged in the following article. While it is desirable that counselling services recruit as counsellors people from all ethnic groups to be found within the district they are to serve, it will never be possible always to match counsellor and client. It follows that all counsellors should take the trouble to learn what they can about ethnic minorities. In other editions of *Bereavement Care* we have published articles on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. In this paper, the author takes a broad view and considers what bereavement counsellors can offer to those of different religions and races irrespective of these differences.

with will involve some investigation into how native British, as well as people of Jewish, Asian, African and Afro-Caribbean and other origins, cope with the loss of relatives and friends. Although counsellors cannot be expected to be authorities on every conceivable race and culture in this country, they ought to have some understanding of at least one other culture's attempts to come to terms with bereavement.

Some cultural perspectives on death

It is easier to appreciate the many approaches to bereavement if we establish the fact that death is not perceived in the same way in different cultural settings. Western culture tends to regard death as a defeat and a failure. It also treats death as a phenomenon to be masked. In the USA funeral directors take great pains to apply the necessary cosmetic to ensure that the deceased lying in the coffin appears to be asleep and not dead. The finality of death is what they try to avoid at all costs. Normally children growing up in Western culture are shielded from the 'horrors of death' until they are old enough and considered capable of facing up to it.

Some cultures, however, are quite open about death. In Jewish tradition it is common to purchase your grave in advance. To Christians the thought of someone actually doing this, or going to an undertakers and selecting the type of coffin he or she would like to be buried in, might be seen as morbid. Yet there are many communities where death is not considered as an enemy or as a defeat. On the contrary, it constitutes a triumph, a well-deserved victory from the rigours of life. This philosophical approach might be thought to be more prevalent in societies where mortality rates are high, and where people are more likely to adhere to the view that the life after death will be better than the present one anyway. There the deceased will be closer to God, hence 'at peace'. Where such concepts prevail, children at a very tender age are permitted to look at the body of the deceased uncle, aunt or grandparent as it lies lifeless in the coffin. It must here be pointed out that belief in the wonderful world after death is not an incentive for individuals to commit suicide when life seems intolerable since there is an accompanying belief that God is in control and therefore it is he alone who has the right to determine whether an individual may live or die.

In cultures where death is regarded as a sign of defeat, there might be the feeling that bereavement ought to be 'gotten over as quickly as possible'. A speedy return to the normal affairs of life is greatly appreciated. One wonders whether this is an adequate explanation for the British stiff upper lip in the face of death. North American Gestalt therapist Judy Tatelbaum offered this advice, which is particularly relevant to Western cultures:

> Wounds do not heal without time and attention. Yet too many of us feel that we don't have the right to take time to heal from emotional or physical wounds. Ideally we should not push ourselves too quickly back into our regular routine lest we accentuate our pain. However, most of us do not have the luxury of withdrawing from our responsibilities, so it is essential that we do not expect too much of ourselves. Since loss makes life feel quite abnormal, trying to resume 'normal' routine too quickly after a death can be a very difficult endeavour.[2]

We may dare to make a comparison between Western practice and that in cultures where death is an occasion for celebration. In Africa, mourning rites are essential in so far as they help the deceased to complete the return journey to the spiritual abode of the ancestors. The duration of mourning is of an extended nature and there is no attempt to 'short circuit' the process. In some parts of the Caribbean, for example in Haiti, the bereaved will wear black for at least a month after the death of a relative. There are other visible signs that an individual or a family has suffered bereavement. As a boy growing up in Trinidad, I would know when one of my Indo-Caribbean mates had lost a relative because his head would be clean shaven. I could also detect in the broader Trinidad community, by observing that a dwelling house had all its curtains removed and all hanging pictures and photographs turned to face the wall, that someone in that family had died. My early exposure to death suggested that it was not a private affair, but something which others within the community had to be informed about. Hence bereavement was not a case of suffering silently and alone, but one in which the heavy emotional burden was communally shared.

BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLING HANDLED CROSS-CULTURALLY

The counselling of bereaved people is acceptable practice within most Western societies but not necessarily so in other cultures. In a recent article in *Bereavement Care* on the customs of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims,[3] John Black acknowledged that, in Britain, the health services must make concerted attempts to understand or provide for their Asian patients. In the concluding paragraph, the author stated:

> Nursing staff in particular can be of great help in advising bereaved and bewildered relatives on the procedures for registration of death, cremation certificates, and finding a suitable undertaker. The hospital chaplain may take on these duties and may be able to put relatives in touch with members of their own religion or community when no relatives are easily accessible. In discussion with the (male) leaders of the Hindu, Sikh and Islamic communities I have not received the impression that there is a need for bereavement counsellors.

We should make a distinction between the need for 'bereavement counsellors' and that for 'bereavement counselling'. Black[3] believed that the skilled, trained, professional counsellor's services are not required for some of the ethnic minority groups. He was not saying that bereavement *counselling* is not required. Counselling *per se* does take place among people of ethnic minority groups in Britain. There tends to be a lot of emotional support for those whose loved ones are ill, and counselling continues at the time of death as friends and relatives do all in their power to comfort those in mourning. So there are structures in place that ensure that the bereaved are counselled.

Although some races *and cultures* do not need bereavement counsellors, organisations for the bereaved must continue to prepare their counsellors to engage in cross-cultural counselling. Cultures do impinge upon one another especially when they exist side by side. Hence attitudes and behaviour

that are not normally associated with Caribbean or Asian or African culture might very well be associated with these cultures on British soil. Counsellors can, however, play a creative role in helping such people of other races and cultures to live through bereavement, but they need to bear in mind that language barriers and a lack of articulateness can be a difficulty for those whose native tongue is different from the counsellor's.

Hints for counsellors

In all races and cultures, bereaved people go through a number of emotional states, eg shock, sorrow, anger, guilt, acceptance and resolution. Counsellors need to be aware of these stages. Whereas in some cultures the family members themselves will help the bereaved through the various emotional states, there is still a need for a counsellor. Colin Murray Parkes[4] suggested that an objective outsider can be extremely helpful in the early stages:

A person from outside the family who offers help at this early stage of grief may find himself or herself occupying a role which is not open to family members. The family are seen as 'too involved', too easily hurt by each other's grief. Also, they may be in competition with each other to show a brave face or retain a position of respect in the family. All families have their own hierarchy, and elements of rivalry and competition frequently distort the natural expression of feeling. If one member cries more, or less, than another, this is noticed and conclusions are drawn about the nature of their relationship with the dead member. Several widows have told me how they felt obliged to curtail the expression of their own feelings after witnessing what they took to be insincere grief in in-laws. Others put on a bold face for the sake of children or elderly relatives who were seen as weaker than themselves. It may, therefore, be easier to talk to outsiders about problems which threaten self-esteem, and those families whose traditions provide no acceptable means of expressing grief are in particular need of an outsider who is not ruled by such inhibitions.

Colin Murray Parkes's insights will be helpful to those assisting the bereaved, whether they are trained counselling volunteers within cultures that subscribe to the value of professional counselling or are family members and close friends within, say, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh cultures. He identified some human concerns that transcend culture, eg that one should never pity the bereaved:

While a conventional expression of sympathy can probably not be avoided, pity is the last thing the bereaved wants. Pity makes one into an object; somehow, in being pitied, the bereaved person becomes pitiful. Pity puts the bereaved person at a distance from, and in an inferior position to, the would-be comforter. So it is best to get conventional verbal expressions of sympathy over as quickly as possible and speak from the heart or not at all. This is not a situation in which there is a proper thing to say: trite formulae serve only to widen the gap between bereaved and non-bereaved.

Bereavement counsellors, whatever the cultural situation, must offer warmth and friendship. This comes about through being aware of the needs of the bereaved. One of the things that people of other cultures often admit to is their need to cry when they have lost loved ones. Crying assists greatly in the grieving process. Bereavement counsellors must therefore not yield to the temptation to prevent those whom they would help from giving true vent to their feelings. Emotional support from the counsellor through periods of difficulty does translate across the cultures, but the accepted practice of not taking over or usurping the individual's right to autonomy must be followed.

Notwithstanding the importance of conversation in a counselling relationship, the bereavement counsellor must not feel duty bound to fill every minute of his or her time with a client in talk. Silence is an equally powerful tool. Presence, more than anything else, is what communicates the care and concern of any counsellor.

Counsellors may not have to do much talking in dealing with the bereaved, but they must be good listeners with the skill to detect more than what is actually said. In normal, everyday conversation, we do imply things even without mouthing them. A common feature of African culture, for example, is that people will often use indirect methods in order to communicate truths. They may utter a proverb or tell a tale. If you are alert and sensitive enough, you will receive the message. Since the British have been credited with a similar habit of dropping hints instead of explicitly stating what is on their mind, they should not find it difficult to decode signals!

Finally, regardless of whom they are trying to assist, counsellors must always be natural and caring so that they can function creatively in cross-cultural situations. They need to learn as much as possible about how bereavement is handled in cultures other than their own, capitalise upon the insights of those intimately connected with the counselling process and then they should be on fairly solid ground.

References

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

I read with interest Dr Jenny Hockey's book *Making the Most of a Funeral** (reviewed in *Bereavement Care* 1992; 11(2): 27). This is based on a study in an English industrial town of how ministers of different Christian denominations approach funerals and how their efforts are perceived by bereaved people.

From my experience as a Church of England priest in both urban and rural areas, I would emphasise that the difference between urban and rural ministry is very marked. In urban areas I was taking up to eight funerals a week, in my country parish two a month.

In an urban parish of 15,000 people served by my curate and myself, there was hardly ever time to do a job properly, bearing in mind all the other work for which we were responsible. In my rural parish, though I had to skid round my three churches pretty smartly on a Sunday, there was time on a weekday to give proper attention to families who had been bereaved, to listen to them and to prepare more adequately for the funeral service. It is a satisfying area of ministry, an opportunity to be of real service to bereaved families. Also, in the rural setting one nearly always knows the bereaved family anyway, and has one's own recollections of the deceased person

I am always saddened when there is criticism on the radio or in the press of my brother clergy in the area of bereavement care, but when it refers to an urban area the clergy have my utmost sympathy. I know how difficult it is and the guilt one feels from not being able to minister adequately.

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* *Making the Most of a Funeral* by Jenny Hockey, with a foreword by the Archbishop of York. Available only from Cruse—Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR. £3.25 + £1 p&p.