

Parents talking in the present tense about their dead child



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What does it mean when bereaved people speak in the present tense about a loved one who has died? Are they denying the reality of the death? This paper offers an analysis of how some bereaved parents in the USA talk about their dead

children. I believe that the use of the present tense in these situations can be explained in terms of some basic cultural principles of this society, principles that are fundamental to the grieving of these parents and have nothing to do with failing to recognise the reality of a death.

After carrying out dozens of research interviews with bereaved families, I realised that I had failed to ask myself why virtually all the people I interviewed occasionally talked about the person who died in the present, rather than in the past tense. I knew that a widely-used clinical indicator of serious trouble in grieving is that a bereaved person denies the reality of a loved one's death by continuing to speak and act as though the person were alive. Denial would mean that the bereaved person was, in significant ways, not coming to terms with a death. When I finally realised that I was ignoring what could be taken as a sign that almost every bereaved person I interviewed was having serious problems, I felt chagrined. Why had I ignored this seemingly important information? Was I also denying that the people I had interviewed were denying?

I think it took me so long to ask these questions because I am from the same culture as the people I interview. Every instance of the use of the present tense in those interviews seemed to me to be culturally appropriate and made perfect sense to me. But why had I not thought of this use of the present tense as denial? An assertion that somebody is denying is almost impossible to refute, because all

evidence to the contrary can be taken as denial. Still, I think I can make a case that the use of the present tense, that I now recognise in almost every interview I do, does not represent denial, and arises from ordinary cultural processes.

ANALYSING GRIEF FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Grief can be analysed from a cultural perspective, one that examines what goes

EDITOR'S NOTE

Ever since Rosenblatt's seminal co-authored book, *Grief and Mourning in Cross-cultural Perspective*⁸, we have come to rely on him to give us new ways of looking at our subject. He does not fail us in this article in which he 'normalises' a phenomenon which many see as pathological – that is, the continuing use of the present tense when talking of a dead loved one, especially a child.

Many bereaved parents have told me that they do not know how to answer the question 'How many children do you have?' Here Rosenblatt gives guidance to those who are trying to help such parents, while at the same time pointing out the pitfalls of continuing to talk as if a child were still alive – something which siblings may find rather frightening or bewildering.

on in the social and cultural world in which a group of people live. Focusing on culture, we can ask about what people think and how they use their language, how their social life is organised and what meanings they give to their activities. I base my analysis on verbatim transcripts of interviews with 27 couples who had experienced the death of a child, age newborn to 33. These couples, plus two for whom I only have interview notes, provided the data for my two recent books^{1, 2}.

Perhaps 99% of what the parents said about the children who had died was in the past tense, which leads me to conclude that the parents' use of the present tense did not represent denial. The life of every parent was engulfed and transformed by the death and the parent's grief, but the parents were as clear as could be that their children who had died were actually dead.

What about the other 1% of what the parents said? In every one of the 27 couples for whom I have interview transcripts, at some point in the interview one or both parents spoke about the child in the present tense.

Studying the interview transcripts, almost all instances of use of the present tense seem to me to be a consequence of one or more of five principles, grounded in ways of thinking that are widespread in North American culture. No one principle applies to the use of the present tense for all parents, and some principles apply to fewer than half the couples interviewed. But, taken as a whole, these cultural principles account for roughly 85% of the instances in which bereaved parents used the present tense.

THE PRINCIPLES

1 Parent and child continue to have a relationship.

The parents remain parents of the dead child as long as they live; the child remains their child. Child death does not cancel parent status

Brett: The grief group...instead of trying to forget about Alex and the pain, they helped us figure out how to make him a part of our family. ...People ask me how many kids I have. I have three: two at home and one in heaven. And I'll explain it different ways and try to make people feel comfortable, but I'll never not say

that I have three kids. And even our family here, our boys and our extended family *will* treat Alex like he's still part of our family. ...We celebrate his birthday, and it's a joyous occasion.... We just try and keep him part of us. And even [our youngest child], and [he] wasn't even around when Alex was born and died...talks about him like he knows him. ...We put a Christmas stocking up for him every year, and put a Christmas tree...on his grave, and...try and keep him with us all the time.

Gail: Randy is in our memories. He's in our hearts. He's in our conversation. He's *always* in my thoughts, especially when you do a family thing. [Our younger son]...certainly knows about him....[Our older son] I think remembers his death....I think Randy is a *very* important part for [our older son]. When he has to fill out a form...in school or Scouts or whatever, and it says on there, 'List your siblings' he'll list Randy.

Kathy: When I picture my kids I picture all five of them. Whenever I say to someone I [have]...kids..., I always think of them...[in] order, but [the ones who died] are still babies. And that's all I know of them. ...I always get an image in my head of their heads doing something. I take a deep breath, but I [sighs] always think of five. So I guess in that sense they are always with me. It's not like I had one and then the space and then two, three. It's one, two, three, four, five.

Some parents talked about continuing to take care of the child by praying to God on the child's behalf.

Earl: I say a prayer every night for them.

Jay: We pray a lot for her. I say a prayer every night.

A few parents talked about taking care of the child by arranging with dying relatives to care for the child once the dying relative arrived in heaven.

Elaine: My sister, she's only 46 years old and she's dying of cancer.... She was [the] godmother [of Kyle] and she ended up dying on Kyle's birthday. [We] made a deal... I would take care of her sons and she would take care of Kyle when she got to Heaven. ...I went up to be with her one night.For...15 or 20 minutes she sat on the side of the bed and she just kept saying 'I'm coming, Kyle. I'm coming, Kyle. I'm coming.'

Parents who continued to interact with the child would address the child directly, as though still alive. (How can one address someone who is present by using

the past tense? In English, that would be incorrect both in terms of grammar and in terms of etiquette.)

Fred: I got angry with Tyler. I still cuss him out. I'll be going some place..., 'God damn it, Tyler, where the hell are you!'

2 The child has a spiritual existence in the present

For parents who believe in a life after death, the death of children does not end their existence.

Tina: In the last couple of years I've...come to a different sort of spirituality about the whole thing. I know she's here now, but she's just not visible, but she sends us signals (laughs).

Angela: We talk to Blake all the time. When my brother died, I told Blake..., 'You have never seen your uncle, and now you get to play with him.' And then when that mother murdered her two little boys, I stood in front of Blake's picture for almost a half an hour...to tell him to take care of those two little boys, because they were up there because their mom was mean. ...'Their mom deliberately killed those kids. And you gotta show them that there are good people in life, and there are better people where you are.'

John: We don't really talk about her in the sense of bringing her up as though she's uh oh, what it's like with her being gone. I guess we never even talk about her in the sense where, 'Oh, this is something Jill used to do.'....It's just as though it's still kind of the present time.

Bonnie: Still one of us.

John: She's still amongst us.

Bonnie: Yeah.

3 The child exists in the present in some location

This is in large part a consequence of principles 1 and 2: that is, for a parent to continue to have a relationship with the child or to think of the child as existing spiritually after death, the child must have a location in the present. It is culturally and linguistically difficult for a person to exist but not be somewhere². The child might be in heaven, the cemetery, a cremation urn, or the room that was the child's bedroom.

Kathy: Yeah, we go to the cemetery, and I just basically fall apart when we're there. I mean they're laying right next to each other. And, you know, I'm just like drawn to it. I just want to, I just want to lay down and be with them.

Rob: We'd had Adam cremated, so he's in his closet as well.

Jane: His ashes are (chuckling).

Vince: There's no way that Randy

couldn't have gone to heaven, 'cause he didn't do anything bad in this life. He's only two months (chuckling). So I know he's in heaven.

A few parents handle the location problem by locating the child, at least some of the time, inside the parent.

Tina: I've again come to a point in my spirituality where now I believe she's with me all the time.

Brett: The boys always say, 'Alex is with us. He's in our hearts.'

For some parents, the child was located in more than one place, for example, in heaven, in a parent's heart, and in the cemetery. However, no parent spoke as though at any specific moment the child was located in more than one place.

4 Things that belonged to the child remain the child's

For some parents, death does not completely end children's ownership of certain toys, clothing, furniture, rooms, or other meaningful things that belonged to them. (In the USA children are rarely legal owners of anything, but are commonly thought of as 'owning' almost anything that they use exclusively.)

Kelly: The albums down there are all Leanne's.... Her clothes are still here. Her animals are still here. And Leanne's room is there. You can walk in, see her Barbie dolls, see her animals.

Wayne: He was very musically inclined.... On his little case...he's got all his little elves and stuff like that, that have like trumpet player and...different activities.... He's got a little baseball there that used to be his.

Bonnie: [We] still haven't gotten into her cedar chest, that's (small laugh) going to be tough. She's got this cedar chest stuffed full, and that just seems so personal.

5 Death does not necessarily end a child's personal or social characteristics

Hannah: He's...a kid, no matter what I cooked, 'Mom, that was great.'

Joy: Jenny just loved everybody.... I remember even from the time she was a baby she'd reach her arms out to anybody to the point where it sort of scared me, 'cause I thought she would go with anybody. She just loved everybody, where none of the other kids have really been like that, and she's been like that ever since she was a baby.

Use of the present tense sometimes indicates that the child's characteristics do not change in relationship to characteristics of the parent. The child will always be bigger or smaller than the parent, always

be seen as like or unlike the parent, always be seen as younger than the parent.

Al: We had talked this over for a long time, a lot of times, why that kid didn't say anything when I put the machine in gear. That's the thing I could never figure out. He's a bigger guy than I am, than I was by far, and he could have let out a holler, 'Hey Dad! Hold it!' Some damn thing.And he's allergic to corn like I was.

EXTENDING THE PRINCIPLES

Although this essay focuses on bereaved parents in the USA, primarily from Minnesota, I believe the principles apply much more widely, to include most English speakers and many other Europeans and North Americans. In their broadest version, the principles might be expressed as:

- A bereaved person may continue to have the basic relationship she or he had, prior to the death, with the person who died. A son remains a son; a friend remains a friend; a mother-in-law remains a mother-in-law; and so on.
- A bereaved person who believes in life after death will at times speak of the deceased as existing in the present. The continuing spiritual existence of the deceased may enable the bereaved to have an ongoing relationship with the deceased. One can continue, for example, to speak to the deceased or pray to the deceased.
- The deceased exists in the present in some location, or perhaps, at various times, several locations.
- Some things that belonged to a deceased person may remain in some sense that person's. Objects, clothing, places in the house, and other things can be understood to still belong to the deceased.
- Death does not necessarily end some of a person's personal or social characteristics. For example, for some who are bereaved, a stubborn and opinionated loved one does not stop being stubborn and opinionated, and a gentle person does not stop being gentle.

DENIAL

I am not suggesting that concerns about denial are misplaced when a bereaved person uses the present tense a great deal in talking about the deceased. But it is my contention that the occasional use of the present tense represents normal cultural processes and is not a sign of difficulty in bereavement. I believe that the bereaved parents I interviewed were not in denial and were not currently blocked in coming

to terms with the death which, in most cases, had occurred years ago. Every parent was clear throughout the interview that that their child was dead, and that the death had caused great pain and led to very substantial changes in their emotional, relationship, spiritual, and, for some, work life.

PROBLEMS IN OCCASIONAL USE OF THE PRESENT TENSE

Although I am arguing that the occasional use of the present tense is normal, I must say that such usage can occasionally create problems. For example, one couple created great fear in their surviving children by talking about the location of their dead child in the present tense.

Louise: I'm finding that out especially with our 15 year old, questions she never asked back then, either because she didn't understand or whatever, she's asking now.

Wayne: Oh, the idea of the cemetery, where she was scared to death to go to the cemetery, because I think she thought Will was, when they buried him they had a hole in the ground, and he (Louise: Yeah, still there) was still there. (Louise: Yeah) So then she didn't want to go there.

Louise: We would say to her
Wayne: We're going to see Will.
Louise: We're going to the cemetery to see Will, and she would just freeze. ...You say that so innocently. What we meant was we were going to the cemetery to maybe put flowers on his grave and in her mind she probably thought he was still in his coffin and was just sitting there. Or the hole was there. (Wayne: Yeah, right. That's how I got the idea that that's eventually what she thought.) And so we never went there with her, because it was so frightening to her.

Another example of this problem occurred in the relationship of a bereaved mother, Erin, with a neighbour, Mary. Erin's son had died in a farming accident shortly after the family moved to the farm where Erin knew none of her neighbours. Mary had also previously lost a son in a farm accident but for years Erin did not realise this, because the way Mary talked about the son made it sound like he was alive. Finally, one day, another neighbour told Erin that Mary's son was dead. For decades Erin and Mary have been best friends and have found mutual solace in talking with each other about their losses. But Erin continues to regret the years in which the possibility of mutual support was missed because she hadn't understood that Mary's son was dead.

WHAT IS REPORTED HERE IS NEW BUT NOT NEW

I know of no references in the literature to bereaved people occasionally talking in the present tense about a loved one who has died. So, in that sense, what I offer here is new. However, in another sense it has been known for a long time. Many of us will have our own cultural knowledge of the use of the present tense when talking about the spirit of the deceased. The literature on bereavement has implied that bereaved people talk in the present tense, for example, when talking about a 'sense of presence', an awareness of the deceased being with them and in some kind of contact³. Klass's work on the continuing relationship of grieving parents with the deceased child^{4,5} provides another example. Still other examples that imply thinking in the present tense about the deceased come from work on people's conversations with the deceased^{6,7}.

OTHER CULTURES

We cannot assume that across all cultures the use of the present tense would be as I have described here. For example, there are cultures in which it is inappropriate to speak about the deceased. There are also cultures in which the circumstances that would lead to talking about the deceased in the present tense would be different from those that came out in my interviews – for example, cultures in which the personal property of the deceased is given away or destroyed⁸ or cultures in which the deceased may be present in reincarnation. Still, I believe that in talking with bereaved people, one should not be surprised if they occasionally move into the present tense in talking about the deceased. Nor, I think, should the occasional use of the present tense be taken as a sign of denial of the death.

HELPING

It seems clear that we can help the bereaved people who occasionally slide into the present tense when talking about someone who has died by accepting that such a way of talking is not pathological. If they are concerned about slipping into the present tense, it seems appropriate to provide assurance of how normal this is. In talking with a bereaved people who at times uses the present tense, it seems quite appropriate to support their use of the present tense by using it ourselves in a way that is in harmony with them. At the same time, it might be helpful to explore with a bereaved person who occasionally

uses the present tense the possibility that such usage might create misunderstandings for children or for people who are not acquainted with the facts of the death. BC

This paper is based on a presentation made at the Sixth International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society, Jerusalem, Israel, July 13, 2000. Of the interview quotations, 15 are drawn in whole or in part from Parent grief: Narratives of loss and relationship and are used here with the permission of the publishers, Brunner/Mazel (Routledge).

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FORTHCOMING EVENTS

St Christopher's Hospice study days. 2001, London, UK. **Conducting funerals and caring for the bereaved.** 22 Feb. **'How I work with bereaved families'.** Talk by Judy Hildebrand. 22 March. **Young people facing bereavement.** 6 April 2001. London, UK. Contact Maggie Johnson, St Christopher's Hospice, 51-59 Lawrie Road, London SE26 6DZ. ☎ 020 8778 9295.

Practitioners working with bereaved couples. 2001. London, UK. Workshops on: 26 January, 16 February, 9 March. Details from Sheila McAuliffe, Tavistock Marital Studies Institute, 120 Belsize Lane, London NW3 5BA. ☎ 020 7435 7111.

Child Bereavement Trust workshops. 2001. London and Buckinghamshire, UK. **Supporting parents when their baby or child dies.** 5 Feb, 12 March, 9 April, 14 May, 4 June, 2 July, 10 September. **Understanding children and young people's needs in loss and grief in the community.** 30 July, 19 September. **Responding to the trauma of a child's sudden death.** 22 March, 18 October. **Coping with post-traumatic stress.** 14 June. **Sponsored one-day courses on children, young people, loss, death and grief** (no fee except £10.00 for materials). Details from CBT, Aston House, The High Street, High Wycombe, Bucks HP14 3AG, UK. ☎ 01494 446648.

Internet support for bereaved people

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Most bereavement counsellors respect the value that support groups can have and will be interested in the growing number of internet bereavement groups now available worldwide. While there seems little doubt that internet

support is helpful for some people and has huge potential, it is important to understand how the various kinds of groups operate and to be aware that many are run without a professional facilitator.

Some of the gains reported by participants in face-to-face groups have included a deep awareness that they are not alone, realising that what they are experiencing is normal, feeling deeply understood, and having the chance to talk about their grief journey. Exchanging informal, typed messages can ease the isolation of grieving in a similar way, and we owe a debt of gratitude to those who have pioneered extending support groups to cyberspace. Some of these innovators have been professionals but others have been bereaved people themselves, reaching out to others. In some cases people have provided support groups at considerable financial cost to themselves.

However, many of the websites offering support are not run by professionals and even if a professional has developed the site, the actual contact with participants will be through volunteers. Usually, these will have received some training and often the comments of the volunteers/monitors/hosts are insightful, understanding and helpful, as are many of the comments of other group members. Frequently, though, the comments tend to offer advice or practical suggestions when it would probably have been more therapeutic to be supportive and understanding.

Little research has been done to examine how helpful such support is and under what conditions it is most effective. We do not know if it is as effective as meeting face to face in a group. The support of an internet group is more like that of peer

group, such as Compassionate Friends (a self-help organisation for bereaved parents) than that of a group led by a professional.

Why would individuals want to participate in such groups on the internet? There are probably as many reasons as there are individuals participating. Some may live in an area where normal support groups are simply not available, or be confined to the house. Others may want to have contact with other bereaved individuals frequently – perhaps every day. The flexibility of internet support groups is an attraction for many who can, for example, enjoy the option of posting or reading messages late at night.

EMAIL GROUPS

A good way to explore internet support is to use a means of communication which

EDITOR'S NOTE

Whether we like it or not, the web is a fact of life which we cannot ignore and is rapidly becoming one of the first places where people with problems and a computer look for information and support. If you enter the word 'bereavement' into any of the common search engines, you will be overwhelmed by the huge numbers of sites which attempt to respond to this need. Future articles in *Bereavement Care* will take a critical look at some of these.

In this article David Martin describes the main types of help that are available and introduces us to the language which we must learn if we are to make sense of this new field.