

# Using bereavement theory to understand memorialising behaviour



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**Abstract:** Two major theoretical approaches to bereavement – broadly categorised as psychological models of adaptation and the more socially orientated concept of continuing bonds – are often used to make sense of the experience of grief. This exploratory article, based on interviews with staff and visitors to one of the UK's largest municipal cemeteries, suggests that there is much scope for applying these theoretical concepts to memorialisation, in order to promote better understanding among the public and cemetery staff of the reasoning behind individuals' memorialising choices and behaviour.

**Keywords:** Bereavement models, bereavement theory, cemetery, continuing bonds, memorialisation

Bereavement studies have expanded over the last 30 years, as has empirical study into the experience of grief. In contrast, insight into the ways that individuals choose to memorialise people who have died has been somewhat slower in gathering momentum. Much of the insight has initially come from the work of historians and anthropologists and their explorations of historical and 'exotic' remembrance culture(s).

Yet can this insight sufficiently account for how people memorialise the dead? Can it help us understand the context of the kinds of memorialisation covered in this article – that is, the transient and temporary 'goods' left at the graveside, such as teddy bears, flowers, balloons, food and similar personal effects?

At the beginning of the 21st century, evidence suggests that the tide is turning as analysis of contemporary memorialising behaviour expands. Studies by Doss (2002, 2008, 2010) and Potts (2007) point to a growing interest in the ways in which people remember deceased people through these kinds of material objects (see also Gibson, 2008; Woodthorpe, 2010). Roadside memorials in particular have been a popular focus of study, as has

'public' memorialising activity for the deaths of high profile figures (see Walter, 2008).

This article's aim is to consider contemporary memorialising activity in the cemetery environment through the 'lens' of two major theoretical approaches to bereavement. It does not intend to tread the well-worn path of debates about the merits of different disciplinary approaches to bereavement and grief; rather, it illustrates the potential for using bereavement theory to understand memorialising behaviour. Data generated from an ethnographic study of the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium in Newham, East London, are used to support this proposal.

## Methodology

The research underpinning this article originates from a four-year ethnographic study of the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium (CLCC) (Woodthorpe, 2007). Co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, City of London Corporation and the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management, the aim of the research

was to examine how different groups of users (visitors, staff and the local community) felt about the social landscape of the cemetery landscape and what went on within it.

Located approximately two miles from the 2012 London Olympics site in Stratford, East London, the CLCC was opened in 1856 to provide a service for all those living in the square mile of the City of London (for more information about the CLCC's history, see Brooks, 1989; Lambert, 2006; Mellor & Parsons, 2008). At over 200 acres, the CLCC is one of the largest cemeteries in the UK, and at the time of the research was maintained by a staff of around 90 people. Due to its physical size and staffing, the CLCC is often regarded as one of the most important cemeteries in the UK (see Curl, 1980).

The ethnography was intended to extend previously published and unpublished work on this cemetery (Francis 1997; Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou, 2005). Over 100 people were interviewed for the project (three groups of visitors, staff and the local community) and the author spent 60 days on site undertaking participant observation over a six-month period. The data used here were derived mainly from speaking to visitors at the graveside or the members of staff who had extensive dealings with visitors to the cemetery (for example, the office staff dealing with grave selection and members of the grounds maintenance team). Informed consent was sought from all participants before interviews commenced and the data reported here have been anonymised to protect participants' identities (see British Sociological Association, 2002).

### Contemporary memorialisation

Cemeteries today are full of mementoes, both fixed (for example, headstones) and temporary (for example, flowers and toys), and laden with meaning. Mementoes left at the graveside can serve a number of purposes: to mark the location of the deceased person; to continue connections with the dead; to provide a tangible focus for visits; to 'honour' the deceased person, or as a tool through which people can communicate with others, both dead and alive (see Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Potts, 2007; Seine, 2006).

Data collected for this study suggest that the meanings associated with memorialisation in the cemetery may be highly contested, depending on how individuals or groups understand the experience of bereavement. Some participants in the research drew on psychological models of bereavement, so illustrating the concept of 'clinical lore' whereby someone without a qualified clinical status nonetheless uses language that posits a "grief process", from attachment via emotional pain to autonomy' (Walter, 1999, p107). For these people, memorialisation at the graveside was a tool through which visitors could publicly reveal their 'movement' through grief. However, for other participants who recognised an ongoing bond with the

deceased person, memorialisation was a way of continuing their relationship by leaving gifts on the grave on significant dates, such as birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, and Mother's and Father's Days. This more 'holistic' understanding of bereavement corresponds with Holloway's (2007, pp160–161) interpretation, whereby:

'Memorials offer a form of immortality for those who have died as well as the possibility of a continuing link between those who have gone and those who remain ... The common thread ... is that memorials provide a focus for *social transition and a psychological and spiritual link* between the living and the dead.' (emphasis added)

My data thus suggest that interpretations of memorialisation are shaped by the way in which the bereaved person perceives grief, whether as an emotional process that one 'works through', or the expression of an ongoing relationship with the deceased person (see also Valentine, 2008). In the public and shared space of the cemetery, the coming together of these different interpretations produced friction, often seen vividly in debates among visitors and staff alike about what people left at the graveside and for how long.

### Moving through bereavement

There were many occasions during the research when interviewees referred to visitors to the cemetery 'moving through' their grief. Often, the trigger for such comments was the belief that the individual was not moving through it at the 'right' speed. For example, one staff member commented on a visitor who had been attending the site daily for almost ten years and '*still* left stuff on the grave' (original emphasis). Another staff member commented on how the same visitor 'should have stopped visiting [and leaving mementoes] so often by now because the death happened so long ago'. Yet another staff member said they felt sorry for this same visitor as it showed that 'they could not move on with their lives ... as they keep coming back here'.

If memorialisation is the public expression of grief, comments such as these support the idea that there is a time limit beyond which grieving is no longer socially acceptable (Walter, 1997).

There were instances too where memorialising activity was taken as confirmation that the memorialiser was having a somewhat abnormal response to their bereavement, as one staff member commented:

'I do think they should kind of rein it in a bit, if you know what I mean? I mean, look at it, that person died almost 20 years ago, and they're still coming and leaving stuff on it? ... I dunno, it just seems a bit too much for me.'

Another participant, this time a visitor, thought that excessively long memorialising activity indicated the memorialiser's guilt, echoing Worden's assertion (2003, p59) that bereaved people can feel they are to blame for a person's death:

'Yeah, sometimes it can go on for too long ... I think it's because they're guilty or something.'

For those participants who implicitly drew on psychological theories to make sense of memorialising activity, this understanding carries with it the assumption that there is a 'normal' way to express grief in public. It also indicates that the *way* in which someone memorialises is seen as an expression of their state of mind (see Potts, 2007). These interviewees clearly thought that grief should in some way 'cease' in a timely fashion, and that memorialising activity at the graveside should reflect this timeframe. The memorialiser whose activities did not correspond with this assumption thus ran the risk of being perceived by others to be grieving 'out of synch'. This interpretation necessarily required that the memorialiser should show restraint in their activity, so as to avoid being seen as pathologically or emotionally out of control.

### Continuing relationships with the deceased

Yet there were many interviewees whose comments and activities suggested that they were actively 'visiting' the deceased and leaving mementoes as gifts, often in order to mark birthdays, anniversaries, and other significant dates and anniversaries. Visiting and present-bringing practices of this kind indicated an ongoing relationship between the visiting person and the deceased, and suggested that memorialisation was not simply a tangible expression of moving through grief (or failure to do so). Visitors' explanations in these cases typically reflected a recognition that bereaved people can, and do, have ongoing relationships with deceased people that do not necessarily correspond with emotional phases or cease after a set period of time. In other words, the practices outlined earlier in this article could be interpreted differently by observers, depending on their understanding of the purpose of memorialisation and the experience of grief. An opportunity to 'care for' the deceased person – the notion that there can be an active relationship between the living and the dead played out through memorialisation activities – was often articulated by participants, as the following comments from visitors suggest:

'I mean, I know they're dead already but to see it look in a big mess like that, it needs to be neater and tidy, and taken care of. Like someone's almost caring for them.'



Memorials in the City of London Cemetery. Photo © ICCM

'I think for some people it's not just to do this, lay the flowers and that sort of thing. They find comfort, they do, they talk to them, say things, they ask their advice.'

'We have a look at the stones, so we do see what people leave behind. There were lots of beer cans left behind on a lad's grave, I think it was his 21st and his friends must have come and had a drink with him to celebrate.'

In this interpretation of memorialisation, interviewees regarded it more as the physical expression of an ongoing relationship with the person who has died – a position consistent with a continuing bonds theoretical approach (see Rosenblatt, 1996; Valentine, 2008).

### Discussion

So what can be garnered from thinking about memorialisation in terms of bereavement theory? First of all, it suggests that there are powerful discourses in the cemetery about what constitutes 'normal' memorialising behaviour – discourses that are closely linked to the way in which the visitor/staff member perceives grief. As a result, visitors to the CLCC can find themselves in a dilemma: to memorialise too much is regarded as a gauge of poor grieving, yet to not do it enough can indicate that they do not care. Indeed, this sense of surveillance in the cemetery meant that the feeling of being scrutinised by others with



regard to memorialising activity was a consistent theme throughout the research.

Second, this coming together of varying expectations about what is 'normal' memorialising behaviour when someone is bereaved could result in friction about what was left on graves and why. This left staff tasked with the governance of the site in a difficult position as they sought to mediate between visitors with widely differing expectations of memorialising activity. Indeed, at times (such as a public meeting held before the start of this study, where visitors were invited to discuss memorialisation in the site, and which, according to staff, nearly ended in blows), staff were required to physically intervene. In addition to negotiating the competing and at times conflicting expectations of 'acceptable' memorialisation, staff also had to avoid alienating current visitors while ensuring the cemetery landscape looked both inviting and accommodating to newly bereaved people. This was no mean feat. In fact, during the period in which this research took place, the cemetery regulations on memorialisation were changed – on the one hand made more flexible about what could be left in this cemetery landscape, and on the other tightened up to give staff more powers to remove 'offending' items that transgressed these rules.

Third, this change in regulation demonstrates the need for clear and transparent guidance on memorialisation in a setting such as the cemetery, which can accommodate varying perspectives about the purpose and practice of memorialisation. What is more, guidance needs to be implemented consistently and fairly to prevent the exacerbation of the already potentially explosive tension that can surround memorialisation.

Finally, the research illustrates the scope for applying bereavement theories to memorialising activity, in order to foster a greater understanding of the reasoning behind individual's expectations and responses to memorialising behaviour in the cemetery landscape. Further research could be conducted to explore what persistent and ongoing visiting to graves indicates: is it an expression of prolonged, disordered or problematic grief, or is it a reflection of a continued, loving and healthy relationship with the deceased? This requires further examination, the results of which could be of benefit to those supporting bereaved people to make decisions about where to inter the deceased, and cemetery staff who need to understand visiting patterns to the site in order to ensure it is a safe, sustainable and welcoming environment. Making connections between theory and material culture is not new, but there is clearly much to be gained from examining memorialisation through the lens of bereavement theory. ■

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