Bereavement and the role of religious and cultural factors

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to give an overview of some of the key dimensions of variation in cultural and religious rituals during the immediate period after a death and in the longer term, in order to inform service delivery in multi-cultural societies. For each area we give examples of different customs, and consider their functions and possible impact. Dimensions considered in the immediate period after bereavement are: The time and space given to formal rituals, expression of feelings, assertion of status and disposal of the body. In the longer term, we look at variations in remembering the deceased and in continuing bonds. Throughout we consider the interplay between individual responses and the person's cultural and religious context. Our objective is to provide an accessible introduction for practitioners new to working with bereavement and provide a succinct reference point for more experienced bereavement workers.

Keywords: Grief, bereavement, culture, religion.

Whilst death itself is universal, the ways in which people respond to death show remarkable variation across different groups and societies (Parkes, Laungani & Young, 1997; Rosenblatt, 2001, 2008). This is of practical relevance for anyone who works with the dying and bereaved in the contemporary world in which people with widely varying cultural mores and religions live side by side. The provision of appropriate services may therefore depend on sufficient understanding of the ways of a broad range of cultural and religious groups (Douglas, 2010). At the same time, the wide variation in rituals within cultural groups, and religious faiths, and tremendous variation within individual reactions to those rituals mean that it is necessary to guard against overgeneralisation (Rosenblatt, 2001) and to have sound awareness of our own cultural assumptions (Walter, 2010). There is a growing literature which describes different cultural and religious customs in relation to bereavements. In recent editions of *Bereavement Care*, for example, Foster *et al* (2012), for example, consider continuing bonds in Ecuador, McNally (2011) describes contextual influences

on grief in Northern Ireland and Abeles (2010) considers Jewish ways of mourning. These detailed analyses are valuable in furthering understanding of societal aspects of grief and mourning and provide insights to practitioners about particular contexts. Our aim in this paper is not to add to this literature, but it is, rather, to give a broad overview, with accompanying examples, of some of the key dimensions of variation in cultural and religious rituals across the course of bereavement. We have outlined considerations about the functions of differences and their possible impact on bereavement processes and on individuals. We hope this will provide those who work with the bereaved with a way of considering the interplay between individual reactions and cultural and religious influences.

The role of cultural and religious bereavement-related rituals

Bereavement – the response to the death of a significant other – is widely recognised as involving considerable

social, cognitive and emotional disruption and it is unsurprising that the death of a partner appears as the most powerful element in Holmes and Rahe's (1967) Social Readjustment Rating Scale. In response to the great impact of death on well-being, societies have developed narratives and rituals, both religious and secular, to enable individuals and communities to deal with death. Tonnaer (2010) expresses eloquently how these not only facilitate coping but also cement links, as she speaks of 'the vitalising and strengthening role death plays in the maintenance of relations between kin as well as of cultural identity …' (p270).

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Cultural and religious expectations and customs vary tremendously regarding the management of grief, including which deaths should be marked, how and by whom grief should be expressed, how long mourning should continue, and whether and how the dead should be remembered or forgotten. These variations become apparent both in the immediate aftermath of a death, in terms of such things as funereal or related arrangements, and in the longer-term aspects, such as remembrance and memorial, which ideally will enable the surviving individuals to move on and continue with their lives. Cultural and religious rites are acted out as the demonstrable public response to a death. By contrast the inner psychological response of the person may be supported or hindered by these displays, dependent on individual differences.

Which deaths are marked and by whom

The issue of which deaths are recognised varies across cultures, sometimes in connection with religious teaching about what is sinful. Those related to shame in particular societies are likely to be secret. Miscarriage and abortion, for example, are not often formally acknowledged in modern British and American cultures (O'Connor, 1995) leading to potential for the griever to become isolated and unsupported; by contrast such deaths are marked in Japan by a Buddhist ritual known as 'mizuko kuyo' which allows the parents to express their guilt and their gratitude to the unborn baby, possibly enabling better resolution (Klass & Heath, 1996-7). Similarly whilst the death of a gay partner may now be marked for both secular and some Christian citizens in Europe and America, this is highly unlikely for those who are Muslim or Roman Catholic. Exactly who grieves, and to what extent, may vary considerably. In some parts of Nigeria, for example, the untimely death of a young man or woman, and by implication the 'untimely survival' of the parents, is recognised through the practice of discouraging the parents from attending the funeral, with this allowing the parents to demonstrate that they are aware of the un-natural order of things and thus ameliorate survivor guilt. Grief of this type, that is not or cannot be acknowledged has been labelled 'disenfranchised grief', a factor which is thought to add to vulnerability to complex grief (see Doka, 2008 for a recent review which takes cultural and religious influences into account).

Variations in immediate response to a death

The period of time that is set aside for rites following a death varies tremendously, and generally will be briefer in modern post-industrial societies and longer in more traditional societies. In the secular and Christian communities of the West, the funeral will commonly take place within a matter of days of the death. It will commonly last around an hour and may be followed by a meal. By contrast, the rituals following a death amongst the Maori of New Zealand may extend over several days. The same applies to the Romany or Roma of Eastern Europe for example, where the wake will last three days before, on the fourth day, the body is buried after a procession to the grave site. In the Christian Orthodox tradition, the funeral is usually on the day after the death, and memorial services are subsequently held at 3, 9 and 40 days, this timespan being similar to the traditions of the Punjabi Barelavi Muslims who hold gatherings to read from the Quran for 40 days, with emphasis on the first 3 days, 10th and 40th (Hussein & Oyebode, 2009; Suhail *et al*, 2011). The time and space given to funereal rites is often, according to religion, for the sake of the soul of the bereaved, but may serve a number of purposes for the living (Mantala-Bozos, 2003; Suhail *et al*, 2011), enabling strengthening of family and community bonds and reparation of the relationship with the deceased. Lengthy rites do not fit well into post-industrial societies and this may give rise to tension for those from traditional communities (Hussein & Oyebode, 2009), whilst on the other hand it is common to hear from people in Western cultures that they suddenly feel abandoned and alone following the funeral (Aamodt-Leeper, 2000).

Whether deaths are marked at a funeral or through longer ceremonies, there are considerable variations in expectations around expressions of feeling (Rosenblatt, 2001). In the West today mourners will be expected to behave with restraint at the funeral, wearing subdued colours and restraining their distress so as not to embarrass others. In some other contexts too, expressions of grief are subdued. Amongst the poor in the shanty towns of Brazil in the 1990s, for example, where infant death is common, Sheper-Hughes (1993) observed how mothers took a fatalistic attitude to babies' deaths, burying them with little ceremony or expression of emotion in unmarked graves, as if emotional attachment would be dysfunctional in the face of high infant mortality. Equally, where the scale of death is overwhelming, as in the holocaust or the genocides in Rwanda (Parkes, 1996), grief may not be openly expressed due to numbness or repression of unbearable sorrow. By contrast, among the Maori of New Zealand, the body and extended family are welcomed to their community's marae or meeting place, and there will be open grieving, making of speeches and sharing of memories before the burial takes place; and this is followed by hakari, a joyful opportunity to reunite with loved ones who may have travelled far to attend. This is reminiscent of the Irish wake and the Romani tradition of story telling. In other societies, display of grief is significant. In Chinese society, traditionally 'crying ladies' might be employed specifically to cry at funerals and show how much sadness resulted from the death (an activity immortalised in the 2003 film of the same name). This is echoed in the Christian Orthodox tradition in which grief is expressed through lamentations and dirges sung by the female relatives and also sometimes by professional dirge singers (Mantala-Bozos, 2003). This allows eloquent outpouring of grief, which is also commonly seen in the Christian churches of the African diaspora where grief may be vocally and openly displayed. The bereaved will be expected to join in with the cultural expectations, whether of restraint, expression of joy or expression of grief. For many, this will lead to the feeling they have appropriately and respectfully marked the passing of the deceased, although for a minority their natural style of expression may feel stifled (Hussein & Oyebode, 2009).

Assertion of the status of an individual through aspects of their funeral can be very important to the bereaved yet is expressed in differing ways. A large funeral congregation is often quoted as a source of consolation in the West, though what is considered large may pale into insignificance beside the numbers at funeral gatherings for those in closer-knit communities. One of our research participants spoke with some distress of the small numbers at a Muslim funeral in the Midlands of the UK, attended by 'only' 300 or so people. In Chinese culture efforts may be made to make a funeral procession as grand, noisy and well-attended as possible, all of these testifying to how highly regarded the

individual was within the community. At times the death of a particularly valued member of the Maori community may result in conflict between different marae and the stealing of the body by representatives of a different 'iwi' or tribe who also claim affiliation to the deceased. Such disputes may be seen as enhancing the status or 'mana' of the individual concerned.

Many cultures and religions have strict expectations regarding the disposal of dead bodies. For many, such as Romany, Maori, Jewish and Muslim, burial rather than cremation is the expected disposal of the body. The Hindu on the other hand use cremation and disposal of the ashes (Parkes, Laungani & Young, 1997), whilst among the Parsi of Mumbai and Karachi, neither burial nor cremation was acceptable. Instead bodies were to be placed in open towers called the 'Towers of silence' for consumption by vultures. Customs of disposal of bodies seem to be changing as communities become dispersed and urban expansion takes up land; a problem for the Parsi has been recent fall in vulture numbers, associated in part with diclofenac poisoning, with the result that bodies are apparently decomposing instead of being consumed. Park (2010) reports on such changes in Korea where numbers cremated have increased from under 6% in 1955 to over 50% in 2005, this demonstrating the dynamic nature of culture. Furthermore religiously determined attitudes may, in some cases, change in immigrant communities in response to the wider context of dominant cultures (Firth, 2003). However, there can equally be strain for immigrant families if their preferred methods of disposal cannot be followed.

Longer term adaptation to bereavement

Once the rituals associated with the wake and burial are completed, there follows a period of further adjustment as survivors learn to live without the deceased.

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Religious beliefs have a central part to play in how people understand ongoing bonds with the deceased. The positive impact of religious belief that there is an after-life has been found in a number of studies of Muslim and Christian samples (Benore & Park, 2004; Mantala-Bozos, 2003; Suhail

et al, 2011). The faith in eventual reunion has been found to be comforting (Brotherson & Soderquist, 2002) and the belief that one can act in ways that benefit the deceased can be a spur to charitable acts and 'clean living' (Suhai *et al*, 2011). The influence of religion and sprirituality has been recently systematically reviewed by Wortman and Park (2008) who propose that the mechanism through which religious belief becomes beneficial is in its capacity to help the individual to make meaning of the death.

Again, there are different expectations in different communities of whether and how the deceased should be remembered. In modern Western societies, there is a common belief that people will experience intense distress soon after a bereavement and should then get over it relatively quickly (Wortman & Silver, 2001; Bonanno *et al*, 2002). Other cultures and religions may hold an expectation that the dead will remain an important part of the lives of the living offering opportunities for ongoing remembrance and a sense of connection. Following the 40th day of the death, for example, in the Orthodox tradition, memorial services are held at 3-month intervals throughout the first year and annually thereafter (Mantala-Bozos, 2003); indeed some societies and religions encourage the maintenance of bonds with the deceased for several generations after their death, for example in Japan (and many other societies), through ancestor worship (Klass, 1996, 2001). It is not known how these continuing rites impact upon adaptation but it is surmised that they may be helpful in promoting the integration of the past with the present and giving some sense of continuity rather than rupture (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996).

The complex interplay of personal response and public expectation is demonstrated in a study by Lalande and Bonanno (2006) who, comparing samples from the USA and the People's Republic of China (PRC), found that higher levels of continuing bonds with the deceased at four months were related to poorer 18-month adjustment in the US sample but better adjustment in the PRC sample.

Similarities across cultures and religions

The narrative above has placed emphasis on differences, but, as has been previously noted (eg. Valentine, 2009) the commonalities which underlie the different approaches of various religions and cultures are of course also informative. In most, a clearly defined set of expectations is apparent; at a time when a person is grieving, being able to follow a specific series of rules relieves those in sorrow from the task of working out what to do. A demonstration of the importance of the person who has died is also apparent in terms of the values of the various communities; the gathering of family and friends to 'pay respects' and a setting after the funeral in which more direct interaction of these can take place also provide a starting point for 'moving on' and reasserting life after absorption in death.

Conclusions

Whilst death is universal, responses to bereavement vary across societies, being influenced by both cultural traditions and religious beliefs. In all cases, cultural ways have developed as a means of softening the blow of death and enabling the bereaved individual and community to carry on, and religious beliefs seek to provide guidance and comfort. Variations in beliefs and expectations entail differing benefits and pressures for bereaved individuals. In drawing together the examples given above, it seems that in fragmented, fast-moving modern societies, where there are often small nuclear families and weak religious beliefs, individuals may benefit from freedom to create their own unique rituals, yet some may also miss the containing structure of religious and cultural certainty, and become lonely and isolated as they try to move on as rapidly as society demands. In more traditional communities, where early death is more common, grief at infant death, in particular, may be attenuated. On the other hand, where extended families are still strong and there is community spirit and religious belief, such that the bereaved may feel held and supported by the prescribed rituals, some may feel that their particular grief is not acknowledged by the ritualised demonstrations of emotion and may feel stifled and constrained by the presence of others.

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this within the social and religious context of their lives to gain a better understanding of the unique benefits and pressures that may influence adaptation and support needs. In this article we have aimed to provide a framework for considering cultural and religious variations close to, and further on from, bereavement, and we have considered the functions various customs may serve. As practitioners, we may be able to assist those who have come to grief, by exploring the person's responses to the expectations their culture and religion has instilled. It may prove valuable in enabling the person to grieve, if we keep in mind the needs those rituals were intended to meet, and consider their 'fit' for each unique individual.

Biographical note

Jan Oyebode, Professor of Dementia Care at Bradford Dementia Group, is a clinical psychologist whose work has touched on cultural and religious aspects of bereavement, through clinical practice with older people experiencing grief in the multi-cultural context of Birmingham, through supervision of dissertations on cultural aspects of grief and through participation in a British Council collaboration with colleagues at Government College, Lahore, Pakistan.

Glynn Owens, Professor of Psychology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, has extensive experience of research and clinical work at end-of-life and runs a popular postgraduate module on 'death and dying' which, *inter alia*, considers cultural and religious influences on bereavement, including from the perspective of the multi-cultural backgrounds of the student body.

We pulled together this article in response to a request for an overview, drawing on our varied experiences, that might introduce GPs to this area, but decided the material would be of more general interest. ■

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