Alternative approaches to conceptualizing grief: a conversation

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Abstract: As an exploration of alternative approaches to thinking about grief, this paper raises fundamental questions about the nature of grief. Is grief one thing or many? Can we theorize about grief in ways that better take into account its complex tangle of feelings and thoughts, its ambiguity, its differences across people, its changes over time, and the diverse ways in which different people talk about their bereavement? Can we capture the sensitivity of the qualitative researcher and the clinician in conceptualizing the grieving of a particular individual and the diversity of grieving across individuals? In the dialogue, 'grief' is discussed as an 'ontological metaphor' as opposed to a real reality. Questions are raised about how to theorize about the grief of people who use particular metaphors in talking about their grieving, and two examples are explored, the metaphor of the hole and the metaphor of the journey.

Keywords: Grief theory, grief as metaphor, metaphors of grief, grief as feelings/thoughts, grief ambiguity and complexity.

Friends and colleagues, Paul Rosenblatt and Ted Bowman, often walk together in Saint Paul, Minnesota, their hometown. While doing so, their mutual interest in grief and bereavement becomes part of the walking conversation. Following the 2012 ADEC conference, Ted asked Paul if he would elaborate while walking and in writing about Paul's presentation entitled: Alternative approaches in conceptualizing grief. This is an edited version of their discussion, which illustrates how researchers and practitioners can benefit from an examination of their assumptions and practices.

Ted: Paul, help readers with a context for your reflections and questions about our current ways of conceptualizing grief. You have recently begun 'retiring' from a rich history at the University of Minnesota as a teacher, researcher, and writer, including much about grief and bereavement. You and I are of the age that funerals of friends and family are more common. And we have recently experienced the death of parents. Further, your career has included focused attention to particular grief experiences and practices such as parents after the death of a child; African-American grief; even the intersection of grief and sleep patterns. I imagine, but may be mistaken, that these and probably more factors caused you to reflect on the ways grief could be considered both by grieving persons and by those of us that teach, research and write about grief and bereavement.

Paul: When I first started publishing about grief, I wrote about it as though I knew what it was. With succeeding publications and years of talking with bereaved people, experiencing my own losses, teaching about grief and reading journals students wrote about their experiences of loss, I became less assertive about what grief might be, less willing to measure it or even define it. As part of my evolution I fell in love with qualitative research. There were many reasons for that falling in love, but an important one was that I did not have to know what grief was to learn from people who had experienced a substantial loss. I only needed to ask them how things were for them since the loss and to be tuned in and smart about what I would catch on to and ask about. And my openness to the complexity and ambiguity of the grief of others came from my sense of how much my own grief was complex, changeable, ambiguous, variable from loss to loss, and difficult to put into words.

Ted: Let's explore what you just expressed. I want to be sure I understand. Tell me about the importance of Weiss' notion of

'the inclusive view' of grief for you. That is, grief can be and is expressed in many different ways. One size does not fit all. That doesn't seem that profound; yet, it seemed significantly crucial to your ADEC presentation.

Paul: The idea that grief can be expressed in many different ways is what Robert Weiss (2008) called 'the inclusive view'. In contrast to the inclusive view, common behaviourist writings about 'expressed grief' seem to me to imply that there is an underlying commonality across grieving people, and I don't think that is true. I think if we want to advance our understanding of grief and grasp and respect the lived experience of grieving people, we have to look at the differences in what is grief and what underlies grief from person to person or from one time to another within a person. Am I setting up straw men? Maybe. But that's not what I see in many of our journal articles and books. I see a great deal of assertiveness and definiteness about things to measure or assess and about what grief is.

Ted: Related to this, in your 2012 ADEC presentation, you started by taking issue with the tendency to see grief as a 'thing'. Even though current models are less static than earlier views, even though tasks, phases and processes have slowly but steadily replaced stages in the vocabulary of grief and bereavement, you suggested that current models still confine or contain grief within their constructs. Did I correctly understand you to point toward a model of expansive processes that cannot be clearly distinctive? You suggested that feelings and thoughts, as part of the grieving process, are usually 'hyphenated'; that is a mixture of feelings and thoughts AND of the past, present and future.

Paul: 'Grief' can be understood as what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) called an 'ontological metaphor'. We talk about all sorts of nonconcrete things, as grief, as though they were as concrete, discrete, and bounded like solid things are, like a piano or a cup, but grief is not a discrete object. It is a sociolinguistic construction. Making it an ontological metaphor, as being like a physical thing, makes it easier for us to use all the concepts and linguistic tools that go with concrete thingness. It's an aid to thought and communication. So I am not saying we make a horrible mistake by understanding and communicating about grief as though it is a thing. But still, if we do not at some point question and back away from the ontological metaphor, I think we are making a big mistake and making trouble for everyone we hope to understand and help.

As Lakoff and Johnson asserted, metaphors highlight some things and obscure others. What do we obscure with grief as an ontological metaphor? How vague, indefinite, changeable, and diverse grief is from person to person and moment to moment. How little standing we have to quantify, like we would something solid. How much our concept of grief may be unique to our own particular cultural, historical, educational, and linguistic place in time. And how much grief might not be one thing but a vast and disorderly mess of things. So my grief is not like yours, and my

grief now might not be what it was like two hours ago. And it's not like I can even fully know or articulate what it is inside of me that I communicate to you as my grief. Thus, a grief therapist, educator, or researcher who stays with grief as a thing and assumes grief in anyone is fully knowable, or that everyone is rather the same in grieving will, I think, miss a great deal about what is going on.

Related to this, I think we might do well to stop thinking of grief as the same from person to person. Having a model of grief or 'the grief process' or 'the tasks of grieving' or 'complicated grief' or something else about grief can help us to get our thoughts clear and to communicate in a basic way. But I think if we actually want to understand someone's grieving, we should try to understand that person's grieving and not fit the person's grieving into a model. I don't know if that speaks to your point about 'a model of expansive processes that cannot be clearly distinctive'. If I am missing your point about that, let's talk more.

Related to my interest in backing away from simple ideas of grieving, I suggested that we might usefully think of grief as often hyphenated feeling/thoughts. [I owe the idea of hyphenated feelings to an inspiring, brilliant, and now out-of-date essay by Jules Henry about anger in families (Henry, 1971). And I owe the idea of grief as feeling/thought to a brilliant work by Unni Wikan (1990).]

Think of grief as a hyphenated feeling/thought, not just sadness or sense of loss but those things combined with other feeling/thoughts – loneliness, impatience, fear, anger, anxiety, emptiness, depression, etc. And understanding the combinations of feeling/thoughts could be crucial to understanding grief. If we simply look at the fact of loss or sadness, we may miss most of what is significant in the grief of many people, and we are less able to understand how diverse grief is across people and within a person from one time to another. With the study of grief I think we have not focused so much on what might be the full constellations of grief feelings, partly I think because we have been trying to devise theories that fit everybody. I think there are thousands of things combined with sadness and a sense of loss for substantial numbers of people. And I do not mean for a moment to say that sadness and sense of loss are the defining elements of grief. As I understand grief, people may not feel either thing following a loss, but they may still be grieving quite intensely.

Ted: I was particularly taken by your discussion of metaphors and grief. In my own work and writing about the use of literary resources, writing, and story-telling, I have often used family therapist Karl Tomm's lovely description of storying and re-storying as normative life processes (Tomm, 1990). Re-storying while grieving often includes metaphors as one searches for ways and words to describe experiences. Help me understand your discussion of metaphors and grief. One conclusion I came to is that in many of the current models metaphors used by grievers get underwhelming attention and may, therefore, be overlooked or misunderstood as part of the grieving journey. If so, the

research results may be skewed because the metaphorical is not clearly included.

Paul: I think there is a lot to be gained in both clinical work and in research from paying attention to the metaphors of grieving people. As a researcher, I think that the metaphors of grieving people may call for us to have different conceptualizations of grief to go with the different metaphors people use.

We already have some work on the metaphors bereaved people use and on clinical practice attuned to the metaphors bereaved people use (eg. Nadeau, 2006; Rosenblatt, 2000; Young, 2007), and of course the therapy literature offers much on the use of metaphor with all sorts of issues, not just grief. But as far as I know we have not developed different theories for different metaphors bereaved people might use in an ongoing way. I think it is important to open us up to think and deal with a wide variety of what is going on with people following a loss – to think about having different theories, research approaches, and practice/support approaches for people who use different metaphors in talking about their loss. To give a sense of how different metaphors might lead us to different conceptualizations about grief, here are two examples.

A common metaphor that shows up in the literature is a hole – a hole in my heart, in my chest, in my self. The metaphor of a hole makes sense in US culture and has been central in the culture of some bereavement support programs, and it obviously plays off the absence of a person who has been important in one's life and plans; that is, there is a social, psychological, and relational hole, a hole in the future, a hole in the giving and receiving of love....

In my interviewing people who use the hole metaphor, they typically talked as though the hole was a hole in the social fabric, the household, the future, life meaning, their roles, and their realities. The holes were experienced because a crucial someone was gone, and the holes were not only about the missing person but also about missing parts of the self. A theory of bereavement holes might start with ideas about where a person might experience holes in social life and self, and how they would characterize the holes they experience. In addition, I think it would be important to know where it was in a person's social life the person did not experience holes. I also think it is important to theorize about what social life is like in relationships between a person who is experiencing a hole and other people. How does a hole show up in couple and family relationships in which all experience a hole? How does having a hole affect relationships with people who do not have holes? Also, we need to think about the relationship of a theory of holes to the notion of continuing bonds. Is a hole a bond? That seems paradoxical, but maybe missing someone is always a connection to that person. Is a hole something to fill in? The message I hear with the hole metaphor is often, 'This will always be with me, and it should be.' But then the hole metaphor may seem to imply something that needs repair or filling in or a loss of self that needs to be repaired. That may be there, but it also may be that the self with a hole is a complete and whole self, and what is needed then is not necessarily repair but acknowledgment, witnessing, and empathy.

Another common metaphor I hear from bereaved people is that of grieving as a journey. My experience interviewing is that the journey metaphor facilitates drawing people out because of all the standard things in our culture that might be relevant to journeys are available – How has the journey been going? Any stuck points? Any sense of where the journey might be going? Have you and your partner (or you and other family members) been on the same journey? Have there been important mileposts along the way? Grief journeys are probably different across people, so should we have different theories for different people? When two partners are not on the same journey or not on what seems to be the same journey where might that come from and what might that do to their relationship? I think people who are into the journey metaphor can be helped with support or practice that stays within the metaphor. Is there any kind of help you want with the journey? Where do you think the journey might be going? Do you think about what might be next on the journey?

With both the hole and the journey metaphor there is a sense that perhaps different people's grief and grief process are different, and we might do well to interview, help, and theorize about people who are clearly expressing a specific kind of grieving metaphor differently. Of course, people do not necessarily stay the same in their grieving, and so the metaphors may change. So how we relate to a person's grief and think about it might have to be different from one time to another. And many people do not lock into a metaphor, and so metaphoric analysis might be a useful thing to do with their metaphors of the moment, but it will not be so helpful in understanding their grieving over the long haul.

Ted: Finally, you pointed participants in the ADEC session to new ways of conceptualizing grief. Give us some of the areas for exploration you deem to be worthy of attention, research, and discussion.

Paul: As I've already suggested, we need to back away from thinking of grief as a thing and instead be open to all the complexity, diversity, variability and ambiguity that may be involved. Although there is a lot to be said for keeping things simple, I think there is also a lot to be said for giving up on the idea that one or even a small number of ideas about what grief is and the grief process will work for us. Instead, I think we need at the very least a rich array of grief conceptualizations and also tools for conceptualizing about specific individuals. Thinking of grief as a hyphenated combination of feelings (or feeling/thoughts) and then thinking (and researching and practicing) differently for the different combinations would be a step in the right direction. Also, theorizing, researching, and practicing differently with people who use different metaphors for their own grief would be a step in the right direction. Beyond that, I think one of the areas that is ripe for new thinking, research, and practice approaches is to get more understanding of individual variability in grieving over time

for a given loss. We have useful theory regarding intra-individual variability in grief. Not only the dual process model (eg. Stroebe, and Schut, 2010), but also notions of situated emotions (like reminders, anniversary reactions), of individual development as it links to grief (eg. Shapiro, 1994) and with it (among other things) the idea that grief unfolds as we get to new developmental places, and of defense mechanisms that don't always work and so people may be defended against their pain at one time and not another. But I think there is more to be understood. We need more of a sense about the possibility of systematic patterning in grief variability. And let's get a sense of what if anything sets off the swings for people in general or for people with particular types of patterning. Let's explore how the swings are experienced and explained by people and those around them. And because I think grief is complex, and 'what' is combined with 'what' (what emotions combined with what, what actions combined with what thoughts, etc) may vary as well as how strongly each element is present, let's explore the relationship of grief variability over time to what the grief is like (what are its hyphenated emotions, its metaphors, etc.). And perhaps we also need a vocabulary for talking about this that we don't yet have, so I want us to work at developing a better vocabulary to get people's meanings and realities as they change over time

I suppose I am also arguing for critical insecurity about what it is we think we know. Is that an area for research, theory, and practice? How can we do our work while being critical and feeling insecure about all that we think we know? How can we live and function with the notion that grief is not an entity but a number of different entities -- and what they have in common is only that they constitute a category of things that happen after experiencing a loss. And feeling/thought X may be experienced by some people and not others and may be experienced at one moment by a person and not at another. By arguing that we should tune in to, understand, and work with variability in grieving I am, of course, saying that we should be suspicious of what we have been reading, teaching, and writing that makes grief seem simple. We must be concerned that (1) we may mislead by being too simple or limited, and (2) we should not get trapped in our own prototypical or paradigmatic exemplars (Cochran & Claspell, 1987, p14).

Paul: So, Ted. Now I want to know what you make of this. Have I gone off the deep end? Do I seem to you not to represent the state of the grief field fairly? Or am I reinventing wheels that are already in the field? Should I say more and make myself clearer?

Ted: My first response, Paul, is thank you! Thank you for your clarity about your own quest for clarity, but not a fixed clarity. You have prompted me to a process of self-examination, an important review of my assumptions as I experience my own losses and as I work with practitioners that do grief and bereavement work. You

and I urge students to always have peer or mentoring consultants for their work. Two or more heads and hearts (thoughts/feelings) are better than one. We learn from others. Your responses to my questions suggest that even the most seasoned of researchers and practitioners should also enter into a process of critical insecurity about their models, assertions, and practices. While listening to you and reading our manuscript, I was reminded of a poem by Denise Levertov. She wrote of two girls who discover the secret of life in a line of her poetry.

> I who don't know the
> secret wrote
> the line [...]
>
> [...] I love them
> for finding what
> I can't find
> (Levertov, 2002, p33–34).

At our best, we write, teach, and speak about grief and bereavement in ways that invite and evoke another's metaphors and meanings used for losses, knowing, in so doing, the other will likely teach us something also. Early in our discussion, you asserted that you only needed to ask others how things were for them and be tuned in and smart about what you would catch on to. I listened to that advice and will now practice it also; thank you.

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