

# Conference Report

Colin Murray Parkes

[cmparkes@aol.com](mailto:cmparkes@aol.com)

The 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society took place in Lisbon from 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> July 2017. It was well attended with a welcome number of new participants from Brazil and the Iberian Peninsula. 154 papers were read and another 58 exhibited as posters; consequently it is only possible to pick out a few for consideration here. Papers about non-death losses and the care of the dying are more appropriate to other journals and conferences; they will not be reviewed here.

My only disappointment was the poor attendance at several of the most important evidence-based research papers and a philosopher, Tom Attig, who sees bereavement counselling as an Art as opposed to a Science, and whose paper asked 'Is evidence-based practice an appropriate model for grief counselling?' (Attig, 2017). His strong questioning of scientific method should not detract from the work of those that undertake the hard graft of data collection and number crunching that remains such an important way to cross the gap between what we assume to be true (our assumptive world) and the real world. This said, qualitative studies and common sense definitely have their place and help to clarify complex issues and generate new theories.

## Prolonged Grief Disorder

In this conference, most scientific contributions focused attention on Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), which is arguably the most frequent complication of bereavement and distinct from normal grief. This has become a major topic of debate in recent years with the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (DSM-5) (APA, 2013) promoting research into its recognition as a mental disorder. Several papers in this conference were to meet their challenge.

Andreas Maercker reported the results of a working group that was set up by the World Health Organization (WHO) to establish the clinical usefulness, reliability and validity of this concept in several nations (Maercker *et al*, 2013). As a result, the next edition of the WHO's *Classification of mental and behavioural disorders*

(ICD-11)<sup>1</sup>, due out in 2018, will authorise the use of a newly defined PGD that simplifies the complex criteria in DSM-5 (APA, 2013). ICD-11 will also agree with DSM-5 that Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD), formerly seen as a childhood disorder, is also found in adult life. Along with others, I have found SAD to be a not uncommon precursor of dependent personality and of PGD.

In recent years, it has become possible to study what goes on in the brain when people are thinking by means of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanning. Manuel Fernández-Alcántara and colleagues (Fernández-Alcántara *et al*, 2017) from the Mind, Brain and Behaviour Research Centre at the University of Granada and the Department of Health Psychology, University of Alicante, have studied 19 people with PGD and compared them with 19 controls when exposed to grief-related and other pictures. The PGD group showed a distinctive pattern of links in the parts of the brain concerned with memory regulation and sadness. The grief-related pictures triggered the recognition of a goal (the dead person) in one part of the brain and another link to the prefrontal part of the brain reminds the PGD sufferer that the picture is not the actual goal and triggers disappointment and sadness instead of joy. These findings are in keeping with my belief that pining/yearning, the distinctive feature of grief after bereavement, is an abortive search for a lost person.

Maarten Eisma's (2017) plenary presentation contributed an overview of rumination (i.e. thinking repetitively and recurrently about negative emotions and/or events in adjustment to bereavement) and outlined two theories that can help in understanding the maladaptive effects of rumination after loss, namely the Response Styles Theory (RST) and Rumination as Avoidance Hypothesis (RAH). Eisma and Stroebe's (2017) recently published overview on this topic in *Bereavement Care* gives detailed consideration of both theories, and in particular of a systematic research program evaluating the validity and clinical implications of RAH. According to Eisma, research suggests that exposure exercises may be particularly helpful in reducing

1 World Health Organization (1993). *The ICD-10 Classification of mental and behavioural disorders: diagnostic criteria for research*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO

rumination and complicated grief, yet a wider range of clinical approaches (e.g. behavioral activation) may also be effective.

A small scale random-allocation trial, by Jenine Wenn (Wenn *et al*, 2017) and colleagues, of 6, 2-hour sessions of what she calls ‘Metacognitive Grief Therapy’, also focused on modifying recurrent thoughts in people with PGD, and resulted in striking improvement. This certainly deserves serious consideration in a larger study. José Carlos Rocha and colleagues (Rocha *et al*, 2017) conducted 4 randomised controlled trials which indicated that short cognitive-narrative interventions, in the form of a manual, were effective for PGD following perinatal losses, termination of pregnancy, widows and bereaved psychiatric out-patients.

Feelings of guilt are a frequent accompaniment of depression but Jie Li, Jorge Tendeiro and Margaret Stroebe (2017) have shown, by means of well recognised questionnaires completed by 1,358 Chinese bereaved adults, that, in that society, self-reproaches are more pronounced in those with PGD than those with depression. Alba Payas Puigarnau (2017) sees guilt as a precursor of the intrapsychic experience of PGD and recommends mindfulness, integrative meaning-making and relational interventions.

## Meaning-making

Although I, now aged 89, was welcomed with tributes from six countries, it was Robert Neimeyer who was the undoubted star of the show. His opening plenary on ‘Finding meaning in loss’ (Neimeyer, 2017a), a symposium on ‘The on-line meaning in loss protocol’ (Neimeyer, 2017b), preconference workshop on ‘Techniques of grief therapy’ (Neimeyer, 2017c) and practice presentation on ‘Reconstructing the continuing bond’ (Neimeyer & Hooghe, 2017), provided copious evidence for his well-researched and clinically useful ways of helping bereaved people to recover positive meaning in their lives.

I see the pining and yearning which is the *sine qua non* of grief as an abortive search for the lost person that is doomed to fail until the sufferer realises that he or she has been looking in the wrong place. Only when the bereaved person searches within do they realise that, in a very literal sense, they never lost the internal world that still includes the person they love. The search for meaning was a key theme of Sara Albuquerque’s (Albuquerque, 2017) mixed methods study of bereaved parents’ efforts to manage and preserve their relationship following the death of a child.

## Cultural issues

These are of particular interest in international conferences and several papers recognise that continuing bonds with the lost person are maintained in various ways from one culture to another.

Daiming Xiu joined forces with Maercker (Maercker, 2017) to show that, in 30 Chinese and 22 Swiss parents who had lost a child, those with the highest PGD scores expressed more negative loss-related narratives than others. The Chinese reported more positive narratives than the Swiss.

Of particular difficulty is the role of Jewish social workers who support Muslim widows of Bedouins who have died in the Defence Forces. Their help is valued by widows despite negative attitudes towards the state of Israel. Is it possible that their psycho-social interventions could contribute to the peace process (Ben-Asher & Bokek-Cohen, 2017)?

In Germany, as well as many Western countries, many bereaved people are dissatisfied with traditional religious funeral practices. The late Fritz Roth, who was a respected member of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement (IWG), piloted a number of innovative services. David Roth, his son, is now continuing the family business using art installations, concerts, lectures, and ‘highly personalised mementoes of the deceased person’s life’ aiming to help bereaved families to ‘reflect in a healthy way on grief, death and finiteness’ (Roth, 2017).

Ozcan Sevet and David Munir (2017) compared the use of prayer after bereavement in the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They found more similarities than differences; in all prayers provide reassurance that death is a beginning not an end. Clara Saraiva (2017) compared funerary rituals in New York and Guinea-Bissau where rites of passage to the next world are important and remain so for immigrants from Guinea-Bissau to New York.

## Useful theory

Ricardo Santos (2017) reviewed the growing number of both anecdotal and scientific studies of grief in non-human animals that support biological theories of grief as rooted in attachments and seen most clearly in maternal responses to the loss of young children. Rebelo’s (2017) ‘Vivential Model’ is a complex Portuguese model of healthy grieving derived from genetics, evolution, neurosciences, psychology and sociology.

It is widely accepted that there is no single therapy or method of counselling that will meet the needs of all bereaved people. Simon Shimson Rubin’s (2017) Two-Track Model divides responses to bereavement into a stress/adaptation track and a relationship/attachment track. Each may require a different intervention. Amy Chow (2017) makes use of the acronym ADAPTS (Anxiety, Depression, Adjustment, Physical Symptoms, Trauma and Separation Distress) as a guide to the problem areas in which intervention may be needed after bereavement.

Alexandra Coelho's (2017) qualitative study explored the concept of Anticipatory Grief and how it relates to post-bereavement adjustment, identifying themes that can inform the development of preventative programmes.

## Other notable research

People bereaved in disasters have benefited from crisis intervention methods (Franco, 2017), Daoist exercises (Chan & Yuen, 2017), and community care (Christopher Hall, 2017). In addition, Jane Mowl and William Worden emphasised the importance of reducing overload by providing support for families (Mowl *et al*, 2017) and staff (Worden, 2017) in disaster areas.

Children are at special risk following bereavement, with lifelong consequences. Martin Lytje (2017), from Cambridge University, set up 19 focus groups with 40 participants aged 19-17 to identify the problems faced by bereaved students on returning to school and how these could be managed. Loss of power over one's own life, feeling different from others, and functioning while grieving were discussed and more understanding and support are needed. Marie Stigaard Tolboll and colleagues (Tolboll *et al*, 2017) reported promising results from a pilot group intervention with bereaved children and young people.

Sacha Richardson, from Winston's Wish, in the UK chaired a symposium exploring the benefits of national and international networking to effect change for bereaved families, consulting on the development of a Family Bereavement Network in Europe (2017). Examples related to children included Alison Penny (2017), from the Childhood Bereavement Network, who presented a national campaign in the UK against government cuts to provision for widowed parents and their children, and explored social security provision for bereaved children across Europe. The Irish Child Bereavement Pyramid and draft *Standards for providing Support to Bereaved Children in Ireland* were offered as frameworks for service development.

In the older age group, dementia is an increasingly frequent cause of lasting disability and death. Consequences for the family of patients with dementia before and after the patient's death were reported in several studies. Meichsner and Wilz (2017) carried out a RCT which showed that families who received 12 cognitive behavioural therapy sessions over six months before the death of a patient with dementia were better prepared for the patient's death than those who had no such support.

## Models of caring

Debbie Kerslake (2017), CEO of Cruse Bereavement Care, presented a model of community bereavement support in which the needs of bereaved people are carefully assessed. Cruse has adapted to meet the changing needs of bereaved

people, developing a range of services and continuing to carefully select, train and supervise volunteers to respond to individual needs and providing advanced level training to meet the needs of particular groups within communities including children and young people, the military family, prisoners and those with dementia.

In conclusion, Professor António Barbosa and his committee have done an excellent job of attracting key researchers and practitioners to a fascinating and important conference. We await with confidence the 12<sup>th</sup> conference in this series that will take place in Melbourne, Australia in 2020. ■

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Chow A (2017). *Multifacet of grief, multifacet of coping: the ADAPTS model*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal. Available from: <http://www.icgb2017.org/plenary-lecture2.pdf>

Coelho A (2017). *Anticipatory grief of family caregivers: a qualitative study*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.

Eisma, MC (2017). *Rumination after bereavement*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal. Available from: <http://www.icgb2017.org/plenary-lecture6.pdf>

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Hall C (2017). *Bereavement following disasters*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal. Available from: <http://icgb2017.org/plenary-lecture7.pdf>

Kerslake D (2017). *Delivering bereavement support in a changing world*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.

- Lie J, Tendeiro JN, Stroebe MS (2017). *Guilt in bereavement: subtypes and associations with health outcomes*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Lytje M (2017). *Unheard voices: parentally bereaved Danish students experiences and perceptions of the support received following the return to school*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
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- Mowll J, Bindley K, Lobb E, Sanderson C (2017). *'Like a Groundhog Day': a narrative perspective on multiple loss in the context of coping with grief*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Niemeyer RA (2017a). *Finding meaning in loss: an orientation*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal. Available from: <http://www.icgb2017.org/plenary-lecture1.pdf>
- Niemeyer RA (2017b). *The online meaning in loss protocol: structure and procedures*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Niemeyer RA (2017c). *Techniques of grief therapy: creative practices for counselling the bereaved*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Niemeyer RA, Hooghe A (2017). *Reconstructing the continuing bond: process analysis of meaning reconstruction in a session of therapy for complicated grief*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Penny A (2017). *National networking to effect policy change: case example of a UK campaign on social security for bereaved children and widowed parents*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
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- Richardson S (2017). *The Family Bereavement Network in Europe: the story so far and the next chapters*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Rocha JC *et al* (2017). *Synthesis of four randomized controlled trials with short cognitive-narrative interventions for prolonged grief*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Roth D (2017). *Giving a home to grief: integrating life and death artfully in a family funeral service*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Rubin SS (2017). *The Two-Track model of bereavement: the changing relationship to the deceased as a life-long process*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal. Available from: <http://www.icgb2017.org/plenary-lecture5.pdf>
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- Saraiva C (2017). *From New York to Guinea: death and grief in a cross-cultural perspective*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal. Available from: <http://www.icgb2017.org/plenary-lecture13.pdf>
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- Tolboll MS, Pederson TP, Jensen do Lopez K, Berthelsen GK (2017). *Group therapy for parentally bereaved children and adolescents: a pilot study*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Wenn J, Rees CS, O'Connor M, Kane RT, & Breen LJ. (2017, July). *A randomised controlled trial of metacognitive grief therapy for Prolonged Grief Disorder*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Worden WJ (2017). *Bereavement overload: the challenge of grieving multiples losses*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Xiu D, Maercker A (2017). *Personal value orientation and meaning-making narration in grieving parents: a cross-cultural study in China and Switzerland*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Grief and Bereavement, Lisbon, Portugal.