**Grief, silence, and language**

*Silence and Psychopathology workshop, Bristol, 1/9/23*

1. **PRELIMINARIES**

Contemporary work distinguishes many **kinds of silence** – **imposed** **silences** and **unknowing** **silences** (Degerman) – **elected** or **kept silences** (GM Hopkins) – and emphasises that silences can be experienced and used in many different ways.

This paper: I focus on silences in **bereavement grief** and (a) distinguish several kinds of literal and figurative silence integral to bereavement experiences, then (b) suggest that these silences incorporate (b) kinds of longing experienced as literal and figurative silences and that are painful insofar as they incorporate (c) a sense of the diminishment of one’s self and world.

1. **GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT**

Grief experiences are heterogenous and dynamic and structured by our actual, desired, or anticipated relationship to the deceased, social norms and practices, and many forms, not all of which involve responding to the actual death of a person (**anticipatory** and **ambiguous**).

Distinction: **death** **losses** and **non-death losses** – the latter include:

* involuntary childlessness (Ratcliffe and Richardson)
* chronic illness (Byrne)
* lockdowns (Richardson and Millar)

I focus on grief in cases of significant death-losses: **bereavement grief**.

Grief as experiencing, comprehending, and responding to the loss of a complex system of possibilities that were central to the developing structure of one’s life and to one’s identity and world (Ratcliffe, *Grief Worlds*).

Such life-possibilities are (a) integral to our commitments, cares, concerns, routines, habits, hopes, dreads and individual and shared life-projects and will (b) depend in many ways on other people – on (i) the existence of a person or (ii) their coming into existence or (iii) our having or having had a kind of relationship to them (*empty nests*; *involuntary* *childlessness*).

How does silence feature within this account of bereavement grief as experiencing the loss of significant life-possibilities?

1. **GRIEF AND LANGUAGE**

Our relationships with very significant others involve various kinds of ‘**language-games**’ in something like Wittgenstein’s sense – reporting an event, speculating about an event, making up a story, guessing riddles, making a joke, translating, asking, thanking (*PI* §23).

Such games often involve practical and social activities and are integrated into our **form of life** and the ways we initiate, sustain, and develop our relationships with other people:

*asking for advice*

*confessing fears*

*daydreaming about the future*

*describing my day*

*grumbling about work*

*negotiating a problem*

*making up after an argument*

*planning an outing*

*reminiscing about the past*

*reporting our hopes*

Suggestion: the intelligibility and significance of certain ‘games’ depends on a former, ongoing, or anticipated relationship with a specific person—*expressing one’s love for another* or *confiding one’s fears for our future* or *remembering our earlier life together*.

Distinction: (a) discourse ‘within’ a life – *gossiping*, *teasing*, *planning* – the noise and chatter of an up-and-running life – and (b) discourse about a life.

This parallels the **two-sidedness of grief**—‘the person who has died is no longer an entity within one’s world but remains as a condition of intelligibility for that same world’ (Ratcliffe 2023: 9):

* I think it's if you live with someone, it's that presence, like pop the kettle on, shall we do/get/order/ that day to day chat that you have. The laughter at the tv, or something you see. Then total silence, I felt at first like I'd gone deaf (Grief Project A18)

**Evelyn King Mumaw:**

* ‘What does one do with that need to tell one’s spouse the things you have always told him? Simple things like: the goldfinches have found the thistle seed, the first crocus is in bloom, the robins are building their nest on the wisteria vine lattice, and “Come, see the sunset.”’ (15)
* ‘I’m hurting so deeply this evening—no one to call me Sweetheart, or tell me he loves me, or to exclaim what a beautiful woman I am. And I don’t want anyone but John to do that!’ (16)

Consider, now, some distinct kinds of silence in bereavement grief.

1. **VARIETIES OF SILENCE IN GRIEF**

Suggestion: there are at least four distinct kinds of silence in bereavement grief, typically occurring together each manifesting a loss of life-possibilities – there may be others, too:

1. silence as the permanent loss of new **communicative contributions**.
2. silence as the permanent loss of the distinctive **communicative style** of the deceased.
3. silence as the permanent loss of interpersonal possibilities caused by the shift from dialogical to **monological modes** of relationship to the deceased:

* “We” becomes “I.” I still find it hard to say “my house,” for instance, it is “our house.” Every single thing that you used to do has changed. You go to work, but come home to an empty house with nobody to discuss the day with. Preparing something to eat is a means of keeping your body going, rather than enjoyment. Watching TV is a way to pass time, rather than something you would discuss or comment on together.” (York Grief Project A18)

1. silence as the permanent absence of **narrative** **closure** – unfinished and unfinishable:

* what death obliterates is the subject of the life whose story would have to unfold in order to be resolved. […] the deceased’s story is permanently interrupted *without* the possibility of narrative closure [and this] is part of what makes a death an occasion for great sorrow and part of what threatens survivors’ ability to accept or find meaning in the event. This lack of closure is not something that can be altered by “telling one’s grief,” and this is one sense in which loss is narratively intractable (Westlund 27)

Such silences are often combined – eg Foot to Anscombe on the death of Murdoch:

* you will never hear the way they call you by your first name again […] It is not just that the dead are silent, that one can never hear their voice again. Once’s own voice is silent, too’ (Lipscombe 257, 276)

Moreover: these silences can be intensified by (a) literal and figurative silences of others about the bereavement and (b) forms of **disenfranchised grief** (Doka).

Such silences are negatively valenced – as **unwanted**, **incongruous**, **impossible**, etc.:

* there are days when I need to hear his voice once more and will call his phone number (which I still pay for) just to hear him tell me to leave a message and that he will get back to me. He never does (Klein et al 75)

Other features: (a) kinds of silence once desired and appreciated now change their meaning (kids arguing; quiet time to oneself) and (b) a sense of *stasis* (cf. Riley – cf. Ratcliffe 2023 §4.4).

1. **LANGUAGE AND LIFE**

Bereavement silences are experienced negatively – as absence, disruption – in part because our world continues to incorporate expectations about the deceased.

Ratcliffe: ‘habitual ways of talking and thinking’ tend to continue to incorporate various ‘recalcitrant assumptions’ – complex patterns of expectation and anticipation that ‘permeate experience, thought, and activity’ (Ratcliffe 2021: 7-8).

Merleau-Ponty: ‘We only understand the absence or the death of a friend in the moment in which we expect a response from him and feel that there will no longer be one’ (82–83)

Many everyday activities involve language-games that have come to be co-defined in terms of the deceased – the word ‘*home*’ (Oates) – and *our* life (eg planning and narrating *our* life).

Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir of 2004 tsunami, *Wave*:

* But our banter doesn’t subside in me. This is very different from those early months after the wave, when all I heard was a sudden whisper, some snatches of sound. Their voices have doubled in strength now, not faded with time. Their chatter plays with my thoughts no end. And I am sustained by this.
* I trip up constantly, between this life and that. Even now, seven years on. A rush of footsteps in the apartment above me is all it takes. It brings me at once into our home in London. I think it’s the boys, upstairs, another scuffle. “Knock it off,” I almost shout. “I’m trying to, Mum,” I hear Vik, ribbing me, as he aims a ball at his brother’s head. Then I have to accept that I don’t have them.

Such silences involve a dynamic of absence and presence: aspects of the deceased persist in one’s world (Fuchs) – enabling imaginative engagement with the deceased and so enabling kinds of **continuing bonds** (Millar and Lopez-Cantero):

* I have never lost that sense of still being connected to F, need only close my eyes and sit quietly and I can still feel his kiss, his hugs, hear his voice. When I don't know what I should do about something, I think what his answer would have been, what he might have suggested. (Grief Project A12)

Bereavement silences involve kinds of absence and presence: ‘games’ one can no longer play; games that no longer make sense; games that now seem pointless or unthinkable – even as playing those games remains engrained in our habitual expectations.

Allan Køster: ‘the world of the bereaved retains **spectral traces** of the deceased … that continuously point to and evoke [their] presence’ (Køster) – a silence where the person was.

1. **LONGING AND LANGUAGE**

Silence in bereavement grief incorporates **modes of longing**– ‘an emotion that pertains to our sense of identity and expresses a felt lack in our being’ (Køster):

* I can go weeks without crying, days without feeling sad. However the hole inside never gets smaller, the longing for his hug, to hold his hand, see his smile, hear his voice, his smell. (Grief Project A14)
* In the evening, the hush in this house is intolerable. I turn up the music, I talk loudly to Sarah, who is staying over, but this silence keeps ricocheting off the walls. I find myself listening out for the boys and Steve […] I am stunned by the quiet in the playroom (Deraniyagala)
* There are times when I long with my whole being just to see him once more, just to hear his wonderful, rich, strong voice call my name, just to cry in his arms, to hear him kindly and compassionately tell me it is all right, to tell him how wonderful I think he is, what a good husband he has been, and that I love him more than I ever knew that I did. Longing unfulfilled can be so sweet and tortuous! (Mumaw 13)

Note the different kinds of longing (eg specific experiences) expressed in different ways.

Bereavement grief silences are characterised by a **longing for the specific other**:

* I long for how her hand feels when interlocked with mine. The feeling of her embrace as it manifests against the specific dimensions of my own body. The look in her eyes as they meet mine and the familiarity of the little wrinkles around her eyes that have become increasingly manifest throughout the years we have shared. I long for the particular kind of conversations I could have only with her. Not only because of the perspective on life and way of expressing it unique to her but because I recognise myself in this perspective (Køster)

Interpretation: one longs to encounter the uniqueness, fullness, and reality of the person – the longing for encounters and interactions which manifest their uniqueness and ‘presence’, including through their embodied performative language—reassurances that only matter if they come from *them*, comments only *they* would have said; funny observations reflective of their personality.

Compare: searching behaviours in grief; relistening to voice messages; graveside reports; speaking to siblings of the deceased – practices that involve relearning a world (Attig):

* Each year, during the holidays and on [her husband] Mark’s birthday, Kathryn takes out the scrapbooks of remembrances of Mark and finds new inspiration. She shares the materials selectively with Josh and Sarah. It gratifies her that each year they have new questions about their father and seem to be getting to know him better [and as] they occasionally refer to him in day-to-life-life (Attig 166)

1. **CONCLUSIONS**

I suggested that are several interrelated kinds of literal and figurative silence in experiences of bereavement grief – crosscutting the distinctions between kinds of silence draw by scholars and straining the literal/figurative distinction.

Such silences are experienced negatively in two intimately related ways:

1. **impoverishment of world**: permanent loss of language-games, utterances, questions, conversational habits, jokes, reassurances, reminiscences expressions of love or trust or support – destabilising the life of which they were a part:

* I think it's if you live with someone, it's that presence, like pop the kettle on, shall we do/get/order/ that day to day chat that you have. The laughter at the tv, or something you see. Then total silence, I felt at first like I'd gone deaf (Grief Project A18)
* There seems to be a silence about the world (Grief Project A04)
* The world seemed surreal. All my bearings for normality were different. Nothing seemed normal any more. It was like something that I took for granted – a boundary of ‘being OK’ broke (Grief Project A04)

1. **diminishment of our self**: permanent loss of kinds of ‘language-games’ diminishes our ability to be and to become a certain kind of person, the one I can only be with *them*:

* I had a really close friend, years ago. Our senses of humour, they were different, but just clicked. It was magic. I’d say something, they’d twist it a bit. When we were in full flow, it was like a double act. I could be *quick* and funny – *really* funny – with them in a way I couldn’t be with anyone else. I’ve never been funnier than when I was with them (per. comm.)

Certain silences are deeply painful, then, insofar as they incorporate (a) an awareness of the impossibility of their own restitution and (b) a sense of the impoverishment of one’s world and (c) a sense of the diminishment of one’s self.

IJK

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