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The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Bounds of Grief¹

Abstract

This article addresses the question of whether certain experiences that originate in causes other than bereavement are properly termed ‘grief’. To do so, we focus on widespread experiences of grief that have been reported during the Covid-19 pandemic. We consider two potential objections to a more permissive use of the term: (i) grief is, by definition, a response to a death; (ii) grief is subject to certain norms that apply only to the case of bereavement. Having shown that these objections are unconvincing, we sketch a positive case for a conception of grief that is not specific to bereavement, by noting some features that grief following bereavement shares with other experiences of loss.

Article

Anyone who loses a loved one will experience grief. At the time of writing—four months into the Covid-19 pandemic—grief is receiving much more attention than it ordinarily would. This is unsurprising: where there is more death, so there is more grief. But talk of ‘grief’ during this pandemic is not restricted to the context of bereavement. In many countries, restrictions have been imposed in an attempt to reduce the spread of the virus. For example, schools, universities, non-essential shops, and cultural venues have been closed for many weeks, and people confined to their homes. These restrictions have been linked to grief in two distinct ways.

First of all, lockdown restrictions have disrupted end-of-life and funerary customs. Many of those who have lost loved ones to Covid-19, or to other causes during the pandemic, have been unable to be at the bedside of their loved one: to hold their hand and say goodbye, or to resolve differences. Funerals have been prohibited, or restrictions placed on their size and form. The same goes for other rituals such as wakes or sitting shiva. These changes to customs and rituals plausibly impact upon how grief is experienced.² For instance, funerary rituals may help to preserve a sense of connection with deceased loved ones, and may also help one to acknowledge the reality of the loss. Thus, we might expect those bereaved during the pandemic to struggle more than usual to comprehend and adjust to the loss of a loved one. Furthermore, distressing ‘unfinished business’ with the dead—more likely when we cannot say goodbye—might lead to unusually prolonged or complicated grief, sometimes requiring medical attention.³

¹ Research funded by AHRC grant no. AH/T000066/1

² This has been discussed in a number of news articles, for example McCallum and Ridley 2020.

³ Klingspon et al. 2015.

Second, many of those who are fortunate enough not to have lost someone have still experienced varying degrees of emotional upheaval. It has been suggested that some such experiences also involve grief. For example, on March 23rd 2020, journalist Scott Berinato wrote a much-shared article in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled 'That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief'. An interview with grief expert David Kessler, the article describes how, in a radically changed world, 'we're feeling a number of different griefs' over, for example, 'the loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection'. Furthermore, some of this alleged grief was (or is) anticipatory, involving envisioning future losses such as a bereavement or a grim economic future.

On the same day, psychoanalyst Lori Gottlieb, writing in the *New York Times*, described how the 'smaller losses' of coronavirus had the power to affect our emotional health along with the larger ones:

missed graduations and proms, cancelled sports seasons and performances, postponed weddings and vacations, separation from family and friends when we need them most. We have also lost the predictability that we take for granted in daily life: that there will be eggs and toilet paper on supermarket shelves, that we can safely touch a door knob with our bare hands, that we can get a haircut and our teeth cleaned or spend a Saturday afternoon at the movies.

As the pandemic has progressed other losses have come to the forefront, especially losses of jobs and livelihoods. One might dismiss the claim that those who have not been personally bereaved during the crisis really are experiencing grief or maintain that the term grief is being used in at least two quite different ways. After all, we sometimes use 'grief' in an extended or metaphorical way (e.g., 'she's really causing me grief!'), and one might worry that labelling too many emotional responses to loss as 'grief' serves only to obscure the distinctiveness of a deeply troubling, life-changing phenomenon. However, we will argue that such concerns are misplaced. In sections 1 and 2, we will consider two potential objections to a permissive conception of 'grief': that it would involve a revisionary use of the term and that grief is subject to norms that are specific to bereavement. Having shown these concerns to be misplaced, we outline some features that wider experiences of loss have in common with experiences of bereavement. On this basis, we will conclude that there is sufficient support for a use of the term 'grief' that is both wide-ranging but still succeeds in identifying a unitary phenomenon.

1. The object of grief

What allows us to distinguish one emotion from another? Many philosophers argue that the answer lies in what the emotions are *about*. There are two senses in which an emotion might be about something, which philosophers talk about in terms of an emotion's *formal* and *concrete* objects. Consider fear. Plausibly, all fear concerns danger, and so danger is said to be fear's formal object, even though experiences of fear can have any number of concrete objects, from hungry tigers to dentist's appointments. Similarly, anger is plausibly always about offence, while its concrete objects, such as acts of rudeness by others, are more specific. Differing formal objects are what distinguish one type of emotion from another. For instance, fear and anger differ by virtue of being about danger and offence, respectively. The formal object also determines how, when we have an emotion, the concrete object is experienced. For example, if we fear the tiger, we experience it as dangerous. If we are angry with our neighbour, we experience them as having offended us.

What, then, are the formal and concrete objects of grief? Grief differs from emotions such as fear and anger in various ways. For one, it does not take the form of a short-lived episode: it can last for weeks and months, changing over time. Nevertheless, it may have a distinctive formal object. While the concrete object of grief may be the death of a particular person, its formal object—one might suggest—is *loss* or *there having been a loss*. However, if grief is specific to the event of a death, its formal object must also be more specific. It involves an *irrevocable* loss and, one might think, an irrevocable loss that is *personal*, in that involves the loss of a person. If that's the right way to think about grief's formal object then by definition, we cannot experience grief in response to other losses. Or, at least, the 'grief' that we feel in these other cases cannot be the same type of emotional experience as the grief that follows a death.

If we allowed that we could grieve over losses other than deaths then a lack of clarity also arises concerning grief's concrete objects. While a bereavement might seem to involve a clear-cut loss of a particular person, non-death losses during the pandemic are often difficult to pin down. Consider, for example, an 18-year-old in the early days of lockdown. They suffer some quite concrete losses: particular opportunities for socialising, a weekend job perhaps, and the exams they were expecting to sit. But they may also undergo, and thus experience an emotional response to, more diffuse losses. They may have lost a relatively clear sense of how their future would unfold, for example.

There is a precedent for considering losses other than deaths as concrete objects of grief, thus also suggesting that the formal object of grief is more plausibly ‘loss’ than any more specific form of loss. As Gottlieb notes in her article, the category of ‘ambiguous grief’ makes space for non-death and difficult-to-pin-down losses. An ambiguous loss could be, for example, the loss of a child given up for adoption or a parent with Alzheimer’s Disease. These losses are not deaths, but they are in some sense losses of particular people.

Other recognised ambiguous losses do not even share this feature with ‘standard’ grief: for example, infertility might count as an ambiguous loss. With infertility, the loss is not of a particular person but of, potentially, several things, including the possibility of occupying a certain role, or of having a certain kind of life that one had imagined for oneself. Ecological grief—grief over climate-related losses—is also not grief over a person and, especially in its anticipatory form, is likely also to be ambiguous. (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, p. 278). We might also understand the experience of chronic illness in terms of ambiguous loss. Living with chronic illness can involve a range of disruptions to one’s identity, such as a sense of independence, closeness with others and an anticipated fulfilling future. This too does not involve the death of a person, but instead involves a range of difficult-to-pin-down losses. Thus, the category of ambiguous grief seems to help alleviate the worry about determining the concrete object of non-death losses. Perhaps some cases of grief simply do not have a single and clear concrete object.

Furthermore, even in the case of grief following a death, it may be an over-simplification to say that what is lost is *the person who has died*, and thus to insist that grief in the case of bereavement is *about* the death (the concrete object) or about irrevocable personal loss (the formal object). Michael Cholbi takes ‘the relationship with the deceased as it was’ to be grief’s concrete object (2019, p. 497). Bereavement, he thinks, involves a kind of ‘loss’ but one that may be better described as a forced *change* to one’s relationship with the deceased. If he’s right, grief might occur not only in cases where the loss is hard to pin down, but also where ‘loss’ doesn’t seem quite the right description to use. Grief might also relate to certain kinds of *change* and *transition*.

Hence there are philosophical positions concerning the object of grief that make grief outside of bereavement intelligible. The fact that losses associated with the Covid-19 pandemic aren’t just deaths need not be an obstacle to their being grieved over and neither does the fact that ‘losses’ are not always specific or easily identifiable.

2. Grief’s norms

Another potential reason for doubting that we grieve over non-death losses and changes relates to social *norms* - unwritten rules of behaviour. Mersault, the main character of Camus' *The Outsider* (or *The Stranger*) does not experience grief over the death of his Mother. We feel, when we read the book, that he is wrong not to: that he *ought* to grieve. According to philosopher Robert Solomon, this reflects the fact that grief is, in some sense, morally *obligatory* (Solomon, p. 78). We might resist calling emotional responses to other losses and transitions 'grief' (at least in the same sense of the term), because such responses don't seem to be subject to these social norms. They are not obligatory in the same way. If someone is not especially sad about losing their job, or about the cancellation of their school prom or their favourite team's football matches, we do not eye them with the suspicion—or pity—that we direct towards Mersault. In fact, we might admire their fortitude and be glad for them. This, one might argue, highlights an important difference between grief and other kinds of emotional experience.

However, the distinction is not quite so straightforward. Suppose, for now, that a certain norm applies specifically to grieving over the death of a person (or perhaps to deaths more generally), and that other losses and transitions are not subject to this same norm. It may be that the norm attaches to certain kinds of concrete objects of grief, rather than to grief itself. That is, perhaps it is not *grief* that is subject to social norms of obligation. Rather, norms concern our responses to the loss of *particular people*, with whom we are in certain relationships. The same seems to be true of other emotional responses. Take pride for example. We might look askance at someone who felt no pride in their child's or their spouse's achievements, thinking that people ought to take pride in such things. But it wouldn't follow that pride itself is necessarily subject to such norms. Suppose I feel proud of (for example) my tidy bookshelves or my ability to cook. If I didn't, I suspect you wouldn't think that I *ought* to feel proud of these things. But it doesn't follow that what I do feel doesn't count as pride. Grief and associated behaviours are like that too: obligatory when it comes to some things, but otherwise, not.

Even taking grief to be obligatory for certain *kinds* of bereavements and other losses would oversimplify the norms surrounding grief. Whether we feel someone ought to grieve is sensitive to the details of their personal circumstances. We do not invariably think that grief over the loss of a close relative is obligatory, and we do not always admire stoicism in the face of other losses. One might withdraw from the claim that someone ought to feel grief over the loss of a family member when one learns more about the nature of their relationship. If that relationship was abusive or distant, for example, one may feel less inclined to condemn or pity an apparently 'unfeeling' response. Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine situations in which we would be shocked by stoicism in circumstances other than bereavement. For example, if

someone wasn't upset by the loss of an heirloom their grandmother gave them, we might consider them unfeeling. Robert Solomon suggests that the kinds of relationship with people that result in obligations to grieve are those in which the other person plays some role in one's *personal identity*. He allows that the loss of 'treasured objects' can also be a cause of grief, but only when the object likewise plays a role in 'defining one's self' (p. 82). If we know that an object is treasured in this way, then we would be at least very surprised by a stoical response to its loss.

In summary, the social norms surrounding grief do not entail that grief can only be felt over bereavement. The circumstances in which we might say that someone *ought* to grieve are too varied for that.

3. Trivialising grief?

A third and final worry about the conception of grief adopted by Berinato and Gottlieb is that it's just too expansive. This worry is partly theoretical, but also, partly, practical. Theoretically speaking, if we call too many emotional responses 'grief' we are in danger of losing sight of an important category or kind. More practically speaking, if we call too many emotional responses 'grief' we are in danger of causing offence: grief can be deeply painful, and can utterly change the course of a life. To compare such an experience with how we feel when an exam is cancelled, might, with justification, cause upset, seeming to trivialise the experience. In this third section we address this worry, by suggesting that there are several commonalities between experiences of personal grief and wider experiences of loss, indicating that the term 'grief' can be applied in a way that is both expensive and unitary, serving to identify a distinctive *kind* of experience.

So far, we have not tried to offer a definitive account of what *does* count as grief. In fact, we do not expect to find a straightforward and all-encompassing definition of grief, not least because the experience of grief varies greatly across individuals, circumstances and cultures. Nevertheless, there are important features that many experiences of grief do share, beyond its objects and its associated social norms. We can address worries about trivialising grief by pointing out that some important characteristic features of grief following bereavement are shared by our emotional responses to non-death losses and transitions, including those experienced during the pandemic. This demonstrates that a more expansive conception of grief does not lead to a kind of 'anything goes' liberality.

As well as having characteristic objects and being subject to certain norms, there are characteristic ways that grief *feels*. Most obviously, we wouldn't count feelings of joyfulness in response to a loss as grief. But the experience of grief is not merely one of

prolonged sadness with a certain cause. For example, grief following bereavement typically involves a period of 'sinking in', during which the bereaved person might simultaneously know, but not believe or accept, that the person has died. There are a number of ways to understand this phenomenon. It may be due to the fact that grief, as Colin Parkes (1988) puts it, involves major revision to one's '*assumptive world*': one's system of core assumptions about how the world is. When a loved one dies, very deeply-held beliefs and ways of thinking and behaving are challenged, and these thoughts and behaviours might be slow and difficult to revise. For example, one might continue to think about what to make their deceased loved one for dinner or save them their favourite spot on the sofa. For a long time, a bereaved person's 'habits of thoughts and behaviour' let them down, and the world in general may seem 'unfamiliar' (p. 57).

The Covid-19 pandemic may have likewise disrupted some people's '*assumptive worlds*'. It may have challenged deeply-held assumptions about the world's safety or one's unassailable freedom to see family and friends, for example. If so, we can expect for subjects to have experienced a similar sense of unfamiliarity and disbelief as we see in grief.

Another common feature of grief following bereavement is disruption to the experience of time. Denise Riley describes her experience with great vividness:

...a sudden death, for the one left behind, does such violence to the experienced 'flow' of time that it stops, and then slowly wells up into a large pool. Instead of the old line of forward time, now something like a globe holds you. In the past...the future lay in front of me as if I could lean into it gently like a finger of land, a promontory feeling its way into the sea. But now I've no sense of any temporal opening, but stay lodged in the present, wandering over some vast saucer-like incline of land...His sudden death has dropped like a guillotine blade to slice through my old expectation that my days would stream onwards into my coming life...this cut through any usual feeling of chronology leaves a great blankness ahead (p. 31).

As Riley's account illustrates, grief can involve changes in one's experience of time, which can even amount to a feeling of *futurelessness*: a 'blankness ahead'. Why might that be? Again, this may be in part explained in terms of one's habits of thought and action. In some relationships, a person might be integral to one's assumptions about how the future will unfold, both in the short and long term. For example, in the very short term, taking for granted that one will go to the supermarket later, involves taking for granted that one will do it *with them*. In the much longer term, when one imagines (for example) retirement, it is *with that person*. As one starts to accommodate the fact that they are gone, the future becomes for a while unimaginable, as one slowly rebuilds a new assumptive world. As Matthew Ratcliffe puts it, in profound grief, one can have a sense of an 'inchoate, uncertain future that is bereft of possibilities one previously took for granted' (2019, p. 534).

A disrupted sense of time was reported so frequently during the pandemic that it trended on Twitter, and was discussed, for example, in online news outlets *Vox* and *The Independent*. Some of the ways in which our experience of time can get thrown off course have nothing to do with grief. For instance, in an interview with *Vox*, Adrian Bardon focused on reports that time seemed to those in lockdown to be ‘endless in the moment and like it’s flown by in retrospect’. This, he suggested, could be explained by ‘rumination’: inward-directed attention, known to make time seem to slow, and the fact that looking back over periods of locked-down time, one felt as if one had accomplished very little. This doesn’t seem to be the same kind of disruption described by Riley. However, other kinds of temporal disruption experienced during Covid-19 lockdown might be akin to the sense of futurelessness that can arise in grief. Take, again, the example of an 18-year-old during the early weeks of lockdown. In the UK and elsewhere, schools suddenly closed, exams were cancelled, likewise for the usual end-of-school celebrations and ceremonies. Unlike the case of bereavement, there is not a loss of a single concrete thing around which their assumptions about the future coalesce. But the upshot might be the same: a future that has become unimaginable and ‘dark’.

It might be objected that in genuine grief one’s loss or transition is necessarily permanent, or at least believed to be permanent. The 18-year-old in our example, surely, understands that these changes are temporary. Lockdown will end, school and exams will restart, we will all move on again. However, in the early days of lockdown, we had little idea how the weeks and months that followed would unfold. Our teenager may not have felt confident that they would be able to pick up where they left off. Even now, we have been cautioned to expect at best a ‘new normal’. But that aside, some of these losses and transitions were permanent. For example, whilst schools and exams will continue, the chance to celebrate the last days of the school year was irrevocably lost. Likewise, the chance to spend the summer months between school and university travelling or socialising normally has gone.

It is ultimately an empirical matter whether the lockdown has truly caused the sense of ‘futurelessness’ characteristic of profound grief. Nevertheless, there appear to be a number of important features that grief following bereavement shares with many experiences reported in the context of lockdowns and other measures that have disrupted how people live. Hence, there are good-enough grounds for acknowledging a conception of grief that encompasses certain non-bereavement experiences, without worrying that this conception either conflates importantly different senses of ‘grief’ or is too wide-ranging to be informative. This does not rule out an additional use of the term, applying more specifically to the experience of bereavement. Nevertheless, we suggest

that a wider-ranging use of the term 'grief' similarly succeeds in identifying features that are common to a range of experiences, rather than a bundle of disparate phenomena.

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