

Commentaries

THE (HALF) TRUTH ABOUT GRIEF

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ABSTRACT

The recent critique of the bereavement field offered by author Ruth Davis Konigsberg takes grief theorists and researchers to task for perpetuating self-serving stage-based models of mourning that ignore the resilience of most bereaved people, while promulgating a form of grief counseling that is neither necessary nor effective. In this commentary I underscore the truth embedded in her analysis, but also the half-truths that result from its simplification and neglect of broader considerations.

Key Words: stage theory of grief, violent death, effectiveness of grief therapy, grief industry

In her briskly selling exposé of bereavement theory and practice, “The Truth About Grief,” Ruth Davis Konigsberg (2011) turns an unflinching eye to what she considers the field’s chief foibles: its unwarranted reliance on simplistic stage theories of grief, the unduly pessimistic depiction of human adaptation after loss, the dubious efficacy of grief counseling, and the export of American models of mourning to other cultures. The virtues of the book follow from her journalistic background: the book is clearly and cleanly written, utterly lacking the turbid text and occasionally pretentious pedantry of academic prose, and developing a compelling story line that can be appreciated by a trade book audience comprised mainly of the general public. By the same token, the same journalistic

impulse also finds expression in the book's greatest weaknesses: it is sometimes too facile to accommodate the complexity of the research she sweepingly summarizes, and too often adopts a rhetorical trope in which the benighted advocates of self-serving ideologies are forced to retreat before the light of contemporary science. The result is an honest,¹ if (necessarily) incomplete presentation of some of the growing edges of bereavement research, in a style that renders them accessible to a lay readership. Here I will summarize Konigsberg's thesis, and offer a few additional remarks that corroborate and sometimes correct her conclusions. In keeping with the principal themes of her book, I will organize the discussion under the following four headings:

1. surmounting stages;
2. broadening bereavement;
3. investigating interventions, and
4. globalizing grief.

SURMOUNTING STAGES

After offering a useful historical commentary on the evolution of 20th century models of mourning, Konigsberg turns to her first major project—debunking the seemingly universal adherence to stage models of grief. Appropriately, she traces this tendency to the phenomenal popularity of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work, and points out what is sometimes missed by its advocates: its misappropriation from work with the dying to apply to the bereaved, its promulgation without any serious qualitative or quantitative research support, and its formulaic simplification of the “journey” through loss in a way that seemingly serves the needs of grief counselors more than those of the bereaved themselves. If anything, recent research amplifies Konigsberg's caveats, insofar as the predominant emotional responses of people in the first 2 years of bereavement depart markedly from those stipulated in stage theory. In cases of natural death, for example, acceptance eclipses other indicators from the outset, and denial and anger occur at consistently low levels throughout the period (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Maciejewski, Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007). But where Konigsberg's portrayal miscarries is in its presumption that stage models continue to be taken as seriously by professionals as they seem to be by the general public. Indeed, a serious reading of authoritative handbooks of

¹From the outset I want to underscore that I do not see Konigsberg as duplicitous or merely sensationalistic in her journalism. For example, I could see how she drew implicitly on her 2-hour interview with me to inform her project, just as she no doubt did with many colleagues who were quoted explicitly throughout the book. But every author, consciously and unconsciously, selects those data, opinions, and observations that serve his or her argument, and Konigsberg's impulse to juxtapose the “new science of loss” with outmoded models of grief leads to regrettable simplification for this reason.

bereavement research and practice will readily convey the variety of models, most of them consonant with empirical research, that address features otherwise neglected in stage theories, ranging from meaning-making in loss through its social accommodation to the reorganization of life goals and attachments (Neimeyer, Harris, Winokuer, & Thornton, 2011; Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008). Simply stated, Konigsberg exaggerates professional adherence to simplistic approaches to bereavement adaptation that have ceased to be taken seriously in scholarly circles (Balk, 2011).

BROADENING BEREAVEMENT

A second strand of Konigsberg's argument is that bereavement, while certainly stressful, is rarely as dire in its consequences as it is portrayed. Her evidence for this is adduced mainly from studies of widowhood in later life, and particularly from the important prospective longitudinal study of bereaved spouses conducted by Wortman and her colleagues over a period of nearly 8 years (Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2006).² In relying on this and other studies of widowhood, Konigsberg appropriately highlights one common form of loss, and offers a more hopeful depiction of human resilience to counter the pessimism with which many may anticipate this nearly ineluctable life passage. But the restriction of attention to spousal loss, typically resulting from death by disease, seriously simplifies the challenges of bereavement under the more tragic circumstances of the loss of a child, the death of a parent or sibling early in a child's life, or bereavement resulting from traumatic circumstances, such as suicide, homicide, or fatal accident. Research clearly documents the far greater tendency of the latter causes of death to result in complicated grief, for example, as well as profound challenges to the survivor's attempt to make sense of the experience and his or her life in light of it (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006). Although the finding that 37% of people who suffer the murder of a loved one somehow manage without succumbing to clinically significant depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or complicated grief itself attests to the reality of resilience (McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, & Williams, 2012), the far greater prevalence of these responses in the wake of traumatic loss gives genuine cause for clinical concern. Broadening the definition of bereavement to include premature, sudden, and violent losses would therefore make a stronger case for professional intervention than the more sanguine assessment that Konigsberg emphasizes.

²Konigsberg somewhat misleadingly attributes this study principally to George Bonanno, who of course took the lead in conducting some of the analyses of the University of Michigan dataset in subsequent papers, as have other independent investigators. Though quite informative in its own right, the resulting work (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004) actually expresses the intention of collaborative networks of investigators to shed light on bereavement adaptation, rather than reflecting the iconoclastic efforts of a lone knight of science sometimes implied in Konigsberg's writing.

INVESTIGATING INTERVENTIONS

Just how effective bereavement interventions are is a third critical strand woven through Konigsberg's argument. Indeed, her jaded assessment of the efficacy of grief counseling permeates much of the book, and buttresses her critique of the "grief industry" in general and certain self-appointed healers in particular, who she contends profit from exaggerating the depth and duration of typical mourning, while proffering generally ineffectual interventions to mitigate it. Here again, Konigsberg's contentions are partially grounded in recent research reviewing over 60 randomized controlled trials of professional grief therapy, which calls into question its efficacy for uncomplicated, non-traumatic bereavement, as the majority of survivors tend to adapt well regardless of whether or not they are treated (Currier, Neimeyer, & Berman, 2008; Neimeyer & Currier, 2009). But as she acknowledges only in passing, this assessment fails to consider the substantial 10-15% of the bereaved who suffer prolonged, complicated grief (Prigerson, Horowitz, Jacobs, Parkes, Aslan, Goodkin, et al., 2009; Shear, Simone, Wall, Zisook, Neimeyer, Duan, et al., 2011), and who clearly benefit from treatment. Unquestionably we have much to learn about who does and does not stand to gain from professional intervention, but even if 1 in 10 bereaved people fit the former category, suffice it to say that meeting their needs would be an ample challenge for well-trained grief therapists for many years to come. A still more interesting issue concerns the role of bereavement support of the sort ubiquitously provided in many Western countries by mutual support groups, churches, funeral homes, palliative care services, hospices, and other institutions, many of which rely on volunteers and paraprofessionals. It is here that Konigsberg's critique may have its purest application, as few such services are evaluated in terms of their necessity, efficacy, or cost effectiveness. Of course, this is hardly a unique criticism of bereavement services, as few social service interventions, ranging from educational enrichment programs for the young to efforts to stem violence or drug use in vulnerable communities, are subjected to rigorous evaluation of their outcomes. Thus, Konigsberg's analysis really highlights a broader challenge for program evaluation that cannot be reduced simply to the self-interested advocacy of grief therapists.

GLOBALIZING GRIEF

Finally, Konigsberg offers an acerbic assessment of the "Americanization" of grief, resulting from the tendency of U.S. culture to aggressively export, and of other cultures to uncritically import, models of grief and grief counseling whose geographical generalization is dubious. Simply stated, it is highly probable that many features of the (chiefly individualistic) depiction of grief offered in North America (or even in other Western or "first world" nations) are of dubious relevance in cultures characterized by different social structures,

relational obligations, and supportive rituals to accommodate the universal reality of death. On close inspection, this contention seemingly is given greater force by another strand of Konigsberg's critique: her suspicion of the guild interest of the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC), which she regards as a powerful North American organization promoting the careers and certification of often woefully under-trained thanatologists who naively take up and promulgate these same culture-bound models. While readily conceding the danger of thoughtlessly transposing models of mourning from one culture to another, I believe this depiction seriously under-represents the contributions of bereavement researchers in many countries, several of which have well developed scientific and professional interest groups of their own focused on bereavement research and practice, including Australia, Belgium, China, Germany, Israel, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, among others.³ Like ADEC, whose conferences, webinars, and publications help disseminate a great deal of contemporary research (including that of investigators like Bonanno and others who Konigsberg quotes with approval), these organizations provide scholarly and applied contexts for international exchange of scientific findings, including many that challenge conventional wisdom and foster the bridging of science and practice. Thus, while much more can be done to promote multicultural awareness regarding bereavement, it may be the very organizations that Konigsberg criticizes that are doing the most to disseminate research on these and other high-priority topics.

CODA

In summary, Konigsberg's (2011) presentation of "The Truth About Grief" does a service to society and the field of bereavement studies by critiquing cultural myths about the stages of mourning, the universal applicability of North American or Western models, the presumption that all loss is devastating and merits intervention, and the belief that treatment, whenever it is offered, is efficacious. But it also sometimes suffers from errors of commission⁴ and more often from errors of omission and simplification. As such, it can be counted a substantive as well as commercial success to the extent that it fosters, rather than forecloses, the reader's curiosity about a field of scholarship and practice that

³Supplementing such national organizations and interest groups are others that are explicitly committed to deep-going exchange and collaboration among field leaders in many countries, such as the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement (IWG).

⁴For example, Konigsberg's report notwithstanding, Monica McGoldrick has never served as president of ADEC, and the organization has never published the journals *Death Studies* and *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, which have always been independent publications, though recently made available at a discount to ADEC members as a further incentive to keep them informed of peer reviewed research relevant to their practice.

is quickly evolving, offering surprising new insights and interventions relevant to grief in its adaptive and less adaptive manifestations.

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Robert A. Neimeyer, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychology, University of Memphis, where he also maintains an active clinical practice. Neimeyer has published 25 books, including "Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society: Bridging Research and Practice," and serves as Editor of the journal *Death Studies*. The author of nearly 400 articles and book chapters and a frequent workshop presenter, he is currently working to advance a more adequate theory of grieving as a meaning-making process.

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