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Using bereavement theory to understand memorialising behaviour

Abstract

Two major theoretical approaches to bereavement – loosely categorised as psychological models of adaptation and the more socially orientated idea of continuing bonds – are often utilised to make sense of the experience of grief. This exploratory article suggests that there is much scope for applying these theoretical concepts to memorialisation, in order that those tasked with presenting and managing memorial options for bereaved people can be more understanding of the reasoning behind individual's memorialising choices and behaviour.

Keywords: bereavement models; bereavement theory; cemetery; continuing bonds; memorialisation.

Introduction

To readers of this journal, starting out with an assertion that bereavement studies have expanded over the last thirty years will not be novel. Similarly, it is not that original to state that empirical study into the experience of grief has also grown in this time. In contrast, however, insight into the way that individuals memorialise deceased people has been somewhat slower in gathering momentum, with much insight initially coming from historians and anthropologists making public their explorations of historical and 'exotic' remembrance culture(s).

Yet can this insight into historical and exotic remembrance culture sufficiently account for how people memorialise the dead? Can it help us understand the context of memorialisation that is covered in this article; that is, the transient and temporary 'goods' left at the graveside, such as teddy bears, flowers, balloons, food and similar personal effects? Indeed, at the beginning of the twenty first century, evidence suggests that the tide is turning as analysis of contemporary memorialising behaviour expands. Study by Doss (2002, 2008, 2010) and Potts (2007) suggests that there is a

growing interest in the ways in which people remember deceased people through these types of material objects (see also Gibson, 2008; Woodthorpe, 2010). Roadside memorials in particular have been a popular focus of study, as has 'public' memorialising activity for the deaths of high profile figures (see Walter, 2008).

This article's aim is to consider contemporary memorialising activity in the cemetery environment through the 'lens' of two major theoretical approaches to bereavement. It does not intend to tread the well worn path of debates about the varying disciplinary approaches to bereavement and grief; rather, it is to illustrate the potential for using bereavement theory to understand memorialising behaviour. Supporting this argument is data generated from an ethnographic study of the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium in Newham, East London.

Methodology

The research underpinning this article originates from a four year ethnographic study of the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium (CLCC) (Woodthorpe, 2007). Co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, City of London Corporation and the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management, the aim of the research was to examine how different groups of users (visitors, staff and the local community) felt about the social landscape of the cemetery landscape and what went on within it.

Located approximately two miles from the location of the London Olympics site in Stratford, East London, the CLCC was opened in 1856 to provide a service for all those living in the Square Mile of the City of London (see Brooks, 1989; Lambert, 2006; and Mellor and Parsons, 2008 for more detail about the cemetery and its history). At over two hundred acres the CLCC is one of the largest cemeteries in the UK, and at the time of the research a staff of around 90 was working at the site. Due to its physical size and staff resources, the CLCC is often credited as one of the most important in the United Kingdom (see Curl, 1980).

The ethnography intended to extend previously published and unpublished work on this cemetery (Francis 1997; Francis et al, 2005). Over 100 people were interviewed

for the project (divided into three groups of visitors, staff and the local community) with approximately 60 days spent on site over a six month period undertaking participant observation. The data utilised here is mainly from speaking to visitors at the grave side or the members of staff who had extensive dealings with visitors in the cemetery (for example, the office staff dealing with grave selection and members of the grounds staff team). Informed consent was sought from all participants before the interview commenced. In making public the contributions of participants in this article, the data used is anonymised beyond identifying the contributor as a visitor or staff member. This is to protect participants' identities according to the usual standards of sociological research, particularly as the venue of the research project is clearly named (see British Sociological Association, 2002).

Contemporary Memorialisation

Cemeteries today are full of mementoes, both fixed (for example headstones) and temporary (for example, flowers and toys), loaded with meaning for both deceased and bereaved people. Those mementoes left at the grave side can serve a number of purposes: to mark the location of the deceased person; to continue connections with the dead; to provide a tangible focus for visits; to 'honour' the deceased person; or to be used as a tool through which people can communicate with others, both dead and alive (see Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Potts, 2007; Seine, 2006).

Data from this project revealed that the meanings associated with memorialisation in the cemetery were highly contested depending on how different individuals or groups understand the experience of bereavement. Some participants in the research drew on psychological models of bereavement and inadvertently the concept of 'clinical lore', which is whereby someone uses language that posits a "'grief process', from attachment via emotional pain to autonomy" (Walter, 1999: 107). For these people, memorialisation at the grave side was a tool through which visitors could publicly reveal their 'movement' through grief. For other participants who recognised an ongoing bond with the deceased person, however, memorialisation was a way of continuing their relationship, through leaving gifts on the grave at birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas, and Mothers and Fathers Days. This more 'holistic'

understanding of bereavement corresponded with what Holloway (2007: 160-161) has suggested, whereby:

> Memorials offer a form of immortality for those who have died as well as the possibility of a continuing link between those who have gone and those who remain…. The common thread… is that memorials provide a focus for *social transition and a psychological and spiritual link* between the living and the dead (emphasis added)

My data thus suggested that interpretations of memorialisation were shaped by the way in which the participant perceived grief, whether as an emotional process which one 'worked through', or the expression of an ongoing relationship with the deceased person (see also Valentine, 2008). In the public and shared space of the cemetery, the coming together of these different interpretations produced friction, often seen vividly in debates amongst visitors and staff alike about what people were leaving at the graveside and for how long.

Moving through bereavement

There were many occasions during the research when participants referred to visitors to the cemetery 'moving through' their grief. Often, this was because they were regarded as not having moved through it at the right speed. For example, one staff member commented on a visitor who had been attending the site daily for almost ten years and "*still* left stuff on the grave" (original emphasis). Another staff member commented on how the same visitor "should have stopped visiting [and leaving mementoes] so often by now because the death happened so long ago". Yet another staff member said they felt sorry for this same visitor as it meant that "they could not move on with their lives… as they keep coming back here". Interpreting memorialisation as the public expression of grief, comments such as these supported the idea that grieving should not go on for *too* long (Walter, 1997).

There were instances too where memorialising activity was taken as confirmation that the memorialiser was having a somewhat abnormal response to their bereavement, as one staff member commented:

> I do think they should kind of rein it in a bit, if you know what I mean? I mean, look at it, that person died almost twenty years ago, and they're still coming and leaving stuff on it?... I dunno, it just seems a bit too much for me.

Another participant, this time a visitor, thought that excessively long memorialising activity was suggestive of the memorialiser's guilt, echoing Worden's assertion (2003: 59) that feelings of culpability can be present for bereaved people:

> Yeah, sometimes it can go on for too long…. I think it's because they're guilty or something.

For those participants who implicitly drew on psychological theories to make sense of memorialising activity, this understanding carried with it assumptions that there was a 'normal' way to express grief in public. It also indicated that the *way* in which someone memorialised in the cemetery was taken to be a sign of their state of mind (see Potts, 2007). There was a clear expectation from these participants that grief should in some way 'cease' and that memorialising activity at the graveside should reflect this, in a timely fashion. The memorialiser whose activities did not correspond with this assumption thus ran the risk of being perceived by others to be grieving 'out of synch'. This interpretation necessarily required that the memorialiser showed restraint in their activity, so as to avoid being seen as pathologically or emotionally out of control.

Continuing relationships with the deceased

Yet there were many participants whose comments and activities suggested that they were actively 'visiting' the deceased and leaving mementoes as gifts, often as a means of marking birthdays, anniversaries, and other events such as Christmas. Visiting and present bringing practices of this kind indicated an ongoing relationship between the

visiting person and the interred deceased, and suggested that memorialisation was not simply a tangible expression of moving through grief. Visitors' explanations in these cases typically revolved around a recognition that bereaved people can, and do, have ongoing relationships with deceased people that do not necessarily correspond with emotional phases nor cease after a certain period. In other words, the same practices could be interpreted differently by observers depending on the way in which they understood the purpose of memorialisation and the experience of grief. An opportunity to sustain a sense of the deceased person being 'cared' for - the idea of a relationship between the living and the dead played out through memorials – was often articulated by participants, as the following comments from visitors indicated:

> I mean, I know they're dead already but to see it look in a big mess like that, it needs to be neater and tidy, and taken care of. Like someone's almost caring for them.

> I think for some people it's not just to do this, lay the flowers and that sort of thing. They find comfort, they do, they talk to them, say things, they ask their advice.

> We have a look at the stones, so we do see what people leave behind. There were lots of beer cans left behind on a lad's grave, I think it was his 21st and his friends must have come and had a drink with him to celebrate.

In this interpretation of memorialisation, participants were concerned less with the 'appearance' of moving through grief and regarded memorialisation more as being the material expression of an ongoing relationship with the person who had died. As a result, participants' comments suggested fewer expectations about 'normal' emotional expression of grief and its cessation after a certain period of time (a position consistent with a continuing bonds theoretical approach, see Rosenblatt, 1996; Valentine, 2008).

Discussion

So what can be garnered from thinking about memorialisation in terms of bereavement theories? First of all, it suggests that in the cemetery there are powerful discourses about what constitutes 'normal' memorialising behaviour, ones that are associated with the way in which the visitor/staff member perceives grief. As a result, visitors to the CLCC can find themselves in a dilemma, whereby to memorialise *too* much is read as a gauge of poor grieving, yet to not do it *enough* can indicate that they are not caring 'enough'. Indeed, this sense of surveillance in the cemetery meant that the feeling of being scrutinised by others with regard to memorialising activity was a consistent theme throughout the research.

Second, this coming together of varying expectations about what is 'normal' memorialising behaviour when someone is bereaved could result in friction about what was left on graves and why. This left staff tasked with the governance of the site in a difficult position as they strived to mediate between those visitors whose expectations of memorialising activity varied widely. Indeed, at times (such as a public meeting held before the commencement of this project, whereby visitors were invited to discuss memorialisation in the site, and which, by all accounts from staff, nearly ended in some attendees coming to blows) staff were required to physically intervene. Negotiating the competing and at times conflicting expectations of memorialisation, cemetery staff were further charged with making efforts to avoid alienating current visitors to the cemetery, while facilitating a landscape that was both inviting and accommodating for newly bereaved people. This was no mean feat. Indeed, during the period in which this research took place, the cemetery regulations on memorialisation were altered to be more flexible about what could be left in this landscape the cemetery, alongside more stringent rules about 'offending' items' removal.

Third, this change in regulation demonstrates the need for clear and transparent guidance on memorialisation in a setting such as the cemetery, which can accommodate varying perspectives about the purpose and practice of memorialisation. What is more, guidance needs to be implemented consistently and fairly to prevent the exacerbation of the already potentially explosive tension that can surround memorialisation.

Finally, the project illustrated the scope for applying bereavement theories to memorialising activity, in order to foster a greater understanding of the reasoning behind individual's expectations and responses to memorialising behaviour in the cemetery landscape. Further research could be conducted to explore what persistent and ongoing visiting to graves indicates; on the one hand, it could be regarded as prolonged, disordered or problematic grief, yet on the other it could be a reflection of a continued, loving and healthy relationship with the deceased. This requires further examination., the results of which could be of benefit to those supporting bereaved people making decisions about where to inter the deceased, and cemetery staff who need to know visiting patterns to the site in order to ensure it is safe, sustainable and accommodating. While connecting theory and material culture is not new, there is thus much to be gained from examining memorialisation through the lens of bereavement theory.

Acknowledgements

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