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Loss, grief, and spiritual struggle: The quest for meaning in bereavement

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“[R]eligion,” write Paloutzian and Park (2013, pp. 6–7):

should be conceived in terms of religious meaning systems, that is, as a subset of meaning systems in general. Meaning systems, as we understand them psychologically, comprise mental processes that function together to enable a person... to live consciously and nonconsciously with a sense of relative continuity, evaluate incoming information relative to his or her guidelines, and regulate beliefs, affects and actions accordingly.

Building on this cornerstone idea, they then proceed to construct a multilevel, multi-method, and in an important sense multidisciplinary foundation for the psychology of religion and spirituality, one capable of supporting and organizing a vast and integrative field of research.

Working within the specific field of bereavement studies, we find this perspective both congenial and comprehensive, comfortably conjoining with the constructivist conceptualization (Kelly, 1955; Neimeyer, 2009) that undergirds our own research. In the

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present article, we hope to illustrate the utility of this meaning system (MS) perspective in addressing the process of religious meaning-making in the wake of the loss of a loved one, with special attention to the significant struggles that arise for some mourners as they attempt to do so. Briefly situating this recent program of research in the context of our long-standing effort to study the quest for meaning in loss, whether secular or spiritual, we will give special attention to those aspects of greatest relevance to the argument that the editors of the *Handbook* put forward. The result, we believe, offers a demonstration of the tenability of the MS model, a growing set of findings relevant to its extension in the area of death studies, and several new methods that we hope will prove useful to other researchers pursuing similar lines of investigation.

Loss and the quest for meaning

Just as Paloutzian and Park situate their conceptualization of religious meaning systems within the overarching structure of meaning systems in general, so too do we place our study of spiritual search and struggle within the broader frame of a *meaning reconstruction* model of bereavement (Neimeyer, 2006, 2001). In this perspective, a central feature of grieving is *the attempt to reaffirm or reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss* (Neimeyer, 2002). Again like Paloutzian and Park, such meanings are understood in terms of the sometimes explicit but often implicit ways that we as human beings seek “replicative themes” in events (Kelly, 1955), discerning and imposing regularity and significance on the unfolding patterns of our daily lives (Neimeyer, 2000). When these lives are relatively unproblematic, the pre-reflective meaning and coherence of experience go largely unnoticed, forming a tacit ground for an orderly perception of the world and our actions within it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

But there are times when the conscious need to find meaning in experience stubbornly or even agonizingly asserts itself. Deeply unwelcome life transitions such as experiencing the death of a beloved, especially under tragic circumstances, are among them. At such moments, the taken-for-granted coherence of life is disrupted, and the simplest routines of daily living require painful review and revision, as when we no longer need to wake to nurse a baby that has died of sudden infant death syndrome, or when in our widowhood we go to bed alone. These and a hundred other violations of the “micro-narratives” of our everyday lives can ultimately vitiate our capacity to make sense of the larger “macro-narrative” of the loss and our existence in its wake, launching a search for meaning that may find few simple answers (Neimeyer, 2004, 2011).

In summarizing our research program on grief and the quest for meaning, we should acknowledge at the outset that we adopt primarily a clinical psychological approach in view of our active concern with the lives of people who have been challenged and changed by tragic transition. We recognize – and indeed demonstrate – that many mourners negotiate their losses with surprising resilience, such that even in their bereavement, the meaning of life (and death) remains secure and unproblematic (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004). When it does not, however, grief can be complicated by a profound struggle to integrate the loss in both secular and spiritual terms, sometimes to a point that professional assistance is warranted (Neimeyer, 2012). This focus on life-vitiating losses of a sort that often leads people to seek psychotherapy situates our work at a mid-level of Paloutzian and Park’s (2013) multilevel model, one concerned primarily with the personal resources (and vulnerabilities) that individuals bring to bereavement, although these of course both presuppose basic neurological processes (Gundel, O’Conner, Littrell, Fort, & Lane, 2003), and are in turn nested within broader family

interactions (Hooghe & Neimeyer, 2012) and social/cultural structures (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014) involved in processing and integrating the loss.

One of the clearest and best researched implications of the MS model concerns just this interface, where abiding meanings meet with apparent challenge and invalidation in the course of living. As Park (2013, p. 360) notes: “[W]hen individuals encounter potentially stressful or traumatic events, they assign a meaning to them... and trauma is thought to occur when appraised meanings ‘shatter’ or violate aspects of one’s global meaning system.” The death of a loved one certainly ranks high on the list of potentially traumatic events, and can carry serious consequences for survivors at the levels of both symptomatology and spirituality. The struggles that can attend bereavement are painfully apparent in our research on African Americans losing a loved one to homicide. Studying a group of 54 survivors on average less than two years from the death, we discovered that over half struggled with intensely complicated grief marked by preoccupation with the death, the sense that a part of themselves had died with their loved ones, and an inability to function in the spheres of family, work, and the social world. Nearly as many suffered clinically significant depression, and almost 20% met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whether or not they were present when their loved one was killed. Importantly, the majority contended with more than one of these syndromes; nearly all of those with PTSD, for example, also tested positive for depression and complicated grief. However, it is worth noting that even in the wake of this horrific loss, a resilient 37% somehow managed to emerge from the experience with none of these diagnoses (McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, & Williams, 2012).

What role does the search for meaning play in accommodating such horrific loss? Evidence from our research on general meaning-making suggests that the answer is “a great deal.” For example, one study of over 1000 ethnically diverse young adults confirmed the significantly greater complication that followed the shattering impact of violent death (by homicide, suicide, or fatal accident) than of losses from natural death, even when the latter were sudden and unanticipated (Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2006). Consistent with Park’s (2013) rationale, however, meaning-making emerged as an explanatory mechanism for the difference in outcome following these forms of loss, as an inability to make sense of the loss functioned as a nearly perfect mediator of this relation (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006). Even in the case of the loss of a partner in late life to generally natural causes, an anguished search for meaning that extends six months or more into bereavement prospectively predicted exacerbated grief and depression several months or years later (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010).

Fortunately, whether in the context of formal psychotherapy or simply in the course of living, survivors of losses of many kinds ultimately accommodate the unwelcome transitions introduced by the death of their loved ones (Currier, Neimeyer, & Berman, 2008; Neimeyer & Currier, 2009). And here too, current research from a meaning-based perspective is beginning to illuminate some of the processes by which they may do so. For example, study of bereaved parents demonstrates that the ability to make sense of the loss is a potent predictor of grief symptomatology, accounting for five times the amount of variance in normative grief symptoms (e.g., missing the loved one, crying) and 15 times the variance in complicated grief responses (e.g., feeling that the future is bleached of purpose, being unable to function in one’s work) as other factors, such as the passage of time or whether the death was violent or natural (Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008). Particular patterns of meaning-making triggered by different causes of death (e.g., violent vs natural) also have been reported (Lichtenthal, Neimeyer, Currier, Roberts, & Jordan, 2013). The salutary effect of sense-making is further supported in longitudinal research

on older widows and widowers, as those who are better able to find significance in the loss by six months report higher levels of positive emotion and well-being as much as four years in the future (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). These and several other studies by our group (see Neimeyer & Sands, 2011, for review) comport with Park's (2013, p. 360) argument that "the meaning making process helps people reduce their sense of discrepancy between appraised and global meanings and restore a sense that the world is comprehensible and that their lives are worthwhile."

Religion and meaning-making in the context of loss

In many communities, as Park (2013) recognizes, meaning-making in the wake of loss naturally involves recourse to religious and spiritual beliefs that provide a sense of divine purpose or consolation for death of a loved one. This was certainly the case in our sample of parents struggling with the death of a child. Beyond the general relation between sense-making and better adjustment, systematic coding of narrative responses of parents suggested patterns of meaning made that were especially associated with better outcomes, including viewing the death as congruent with God's will, endorsing the prospect for reunion in an afterlife, and the (potentially more secular) belief that the child was no longer suffering. Likewise, better accommodation of the loss was reported by parents who found unsought spiritual benefits in the tragedy, who realigned life priorities, or who dedicated themselves to needed lifestyle changes (Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, & Keesee, 2010).

When such meaning-making proves elusive, however, evidence suggests that the impact can be severe in terms of their spiritual as well as psychological well-being. For a substantial subset of the African American homicide survivors that we studied, for example, the murder of their loved one ushered in not only depression, PTSD and complicated grief, but also *complicated spiritual grief*, understood as an intense form of spiritual struggle or crisis precipitated by the death. Such complications, when they occurred, often suggested a disruption in the mourner's relationship with God, as illustrated by the comments of one 69-year-old woman grieving her grandson's murder:

I felt that God had allowed the capriciousness of life to invade our world. I wondered aloud if our entire family and our belief system were merely a cosmic joke. I questioned why God permitted such a painful and horrendous act when he had the power to stop it.

For others, the complication centered on their changed relationship with fellow church members. Another 59-year-old woman spoke of the aftermath of her husband's homicide, saying:

I thought I could rely on my church community, but they grew tired of trying to console me and took advantage of my vulnerability. They said they would be there for me, but I didn't know there would be a time limit.

For many survivors, the two forms of struggle were conjoined in a constellation of "negative religious coping" (Koenig, Pargament, & Nielsen, 1998) that compounded the literal loss with a symbolic and social one. We have subsequently documented this association between such spiritual struggle and poor grief outcomes in ethnically diverse samples grieving a variety of natural and violent deaths (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014).

Moreover, longitudinal study of the kind recommended by Park (2013) of the relation between attempts at religious meaning-making and distress has begun to suggest some

interesting relations between the two. For example, tracing the adaptation of the African American homicide survivors across six months, we discovered that complicated grief at Time 1 prospectively predicted complicated spiritual grief at Time 2, suggesting that the violent sundering of attachment associated with this horrific loss also undermined a sense of meaning and relationship with God and the spiritual community in the months that followed. Interestingly, the reverse was not the case, as spiritual struggle earlier in bereavement did not portend later complicated grief. Nor, to our surprise, was “positive religious coping” in the form of grounding oneself in one’s beliefs or turning to God or co-religionists for consolation predictive of less complicated grief (Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-Murphy, Ippolito, & Roberts, 2011), a finding that we have replicated in other samples (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014). Further study demonstrated that neither Time 1 depression nor PTSD forecast spiritual struggles at Time 2; instead, intense grief uniquely seemed to provide the instigating context for such crisis (Neimeyer & Burke, 2011).

The absence of a clear link between positive religious coping and attenuated grief notwithstanding, a strong spiritual orientation may nonetheless predispose to positive bereavement outcomes in another sense, as those people who self-identify as more religious and who practice their tradition tend to report greater post-loss growth in our studies, as do those who experience violent death as opposed to natural death bereavement (Currier, Malott, Martinez, Sandy, & Neimeyer, 2012). Thus, while religiousness might not in itself mitigate the pain of loss, as Park (2013) notes it may nevertheless set the stage for greater growth through the experience.

Methodological contributions

In their closing chapter of the *Handbook*, Park and Paloutzian (2013) argue for a “multilevel methodology,” rightly recognizing that methodologically distinctive studies – such as those using quantitative questionnaires, qualitative interviews, and experimental research – when converging on similar conclusions, contribute to the identification of more robust principles than do those relying on a mono-method base. In keeping with this principle, and to augment the fairly narrow range of measures currently available to advance the MS research agenda in bereavement studies, we have constructed a number of both quantitative and qualitative assessments of relevant constructs to which we will briefly orient the reader in the space available.

Assessing general meaning systems

Because we, like Park (2013), are interested in the role of meaning systems in general in helping people accommodate unwelcome life transitions and losses, we have constructed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the assessment of meaning amenable to both secular and spiritual contexts. One such measure is the 16-item *Integration of Stressful Life Experiences Scale* (ISLES; Holland, Currier, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2010), an easy-to-use, multidimensional, and well-validated measure of the meaning made after stressful life events, including bereavement. In two samples of young adults – 178 who had experienced a variety of stressors and 150 who had experienced a recent bereavement – ISLES scores were shown to have strong internal consistency and, among a subsample of participants, also exhibited moderate test-retest reliability. In both samples, support was also found for a two-factor structure, with one factor assessing one’s sense of *Footing in the World* (e.g., “This event made me feel less purposeful”), and a second measuring the *Comprehensibility* of the event (e.g., “I am perplexed by what happened”).

Convergent validity analyses revealed that ISLES scores are strongly associated with other theoretically related measures and with mental and physical health outcomes, offering support for the potential utility of this measure in research and clinical settings. Subsequent research on a large sample of 741 bereaved adults confirmed the factor structure of the scale in its original and in an abbreviated six-item form, and demonstrated the incremental validity of both formats in predicting health and mental health outcomes even after such factors as demographics, circumstances of the death, and prolonged grief symptoms are taken into account (Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2014).

A complementary approach to meaning assessment is grounded in the qualitative analysis of the narrative responses of a diverse sample of 162 mourners concerning their attempts to make sense of loss and find some compensatory benefit in the experience. The result was the development of the *Meaning in Loss Codebook* (MLC; Gillies, Neimeyer, & Milman, 2014) – a reliable and comprehensive coding system for analyzing meanings made in the wake of the death of a loved one. The MLC encompasses 30 specific categories of meaning made demonstrating excellent reliability, and comprising both negative (e.g., *Lack of Understanding, Regret*) and positive (e.g., *Compassion, Moving On*) themes that arise as griever attempt to make sense of loss. The MLC thus could prove useful in process-outcome studies of grief therapy, analysis of naturalistic first-person writing about bereavement experiences in grief diaries and blogs, and clinical assessment of meanings made in the course of bereavement support or professional intervention.

Assessing spiritual struggle

Although we have found general measures of religious coping like the RCOPE (Hill & Pargament, 2008) to be useful in studying the spiritual struggle that often follows the death of a loved one, we ultimately have found it valuable to develop a measure specifically validated for use with bereaved populations. The result was the *Inventory of Complicated Spiritual Grief* (ICSG; Burke et al., 2014). With two diverse samples of bereaved adult Christians ($N = 304$), we found that the ICSG had strong internal consistency and high test-retest reliability for its constituent sub-scales in a subsample of participants. Analyses of both samples supported a two-factor model, with one factor measuring *Insecurity with God* (e.g., “I don’t understand why God has made it so hard for me”) and the other assessing *Disruption in Religious Practice* (e.g., “I go out of my way to avoid spiritual/religious activities (prayer, worship, Bible reading)”). Analyses further supported the convergent and incremental validity of the 18-item ICSG relative to other theoretically similar instruments and measures of poor bereavement outcome, suggesting its specific relevance to studying spiritual crisis in bereavement.

Finally, as with our general assessment of meaning systems discussed above, we have also pursued qualitative research that fleshes out our understanding of the meanings made in the context of spiritual struggle (Burke, Neimeyer, Young, & Piazza-Bonin, 2014). Using 84 participants’ written responses to open-ended questions along with systematic exploration of this topic with a focus group, we conducted a directed content analysis that revealed 17 different themes subsumed in an overarching narrative of resentment and doubt toward God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in the bereaved person’s spiritual beliefs and behaviors. Thus, the study clarified the construct of complicated spiritual grief, and laid the groundwork for the development of more specific study and treatment of this condition.

Conclusion

Like Palouzian and Park, we are optimistic about the potential contributions of a meaning systems perspective as an integrative frame for the psychology of religion, and are encouraged by the recent burgeoning of research in this area. We hope that our own line of investigation into the quest for meaning and spiritual significance in the wake of loss makes a modest contribution to this effort.

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