The Social Regulation of Grief

Martha R. Fowlkes

This article explores the social regulation of grief as a function of normative criteria that assign differential social merit to different kinds of major relationship losses. Grief scholarship has been built largely on conventional assumptions about intimate attachment and its loss that overlook the possibility that the loss of an intimate other may not confer a socially legitimate right to grieve. This suggests the importance of understanding both the grief role and the subjective experience of grief itself as socially constructed. The social regulation of grief is examined in terms of the loss of "de-moralized" intimate relationships—those that are socially undervalued as well as those that are socially devalued, or stigmatized.

KEY WORDS: grief; loss; mourning; stigma; intimate relationships.

INTRODUCTION

For the living, grief is the partner of death. Over centuries the endurance of the special sorrow associated with the death of attachment has been the preoccupation of artists, writers, philosophers, musicians, and theologians for whom grief looms as ineffable, elusive, inchoate, and ultimately unknowable. Only relatively recently has grief been the topic of systematic research as a potentially comprehensible social and behavioral phenomenon. Prevaling sociological and psychological formulations of the features and processes of bereavement, however, are founded in a combination of unexamined assumptions about, and constricted investigations into, the impact on the individual of relationship loss and the factors in the recovery from loss.

1School of Family Studies, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut 06269-2058.
The extensive existing literature on grief consists almost entirely of studies or accounts of the response to the death of a nuclear-family member—that is of widows, widowers, and bereaved parents. Major and representative works and reviews include Beck, 1965; Caine, 1974; Clayton et al., 1968; Fox, 1980; Fulton, 1970; Glick et al., 1974; Hyman, 1983; Kohn and Kohn, 1978; Lewis, 1961; Lopata, 1979; Marris, 1958; Neugarten and Hagestad, 1976; Parkes, 1986; Peppers and Knapp, 1980; Raphael, 1984; Riley, 1983; Rubenstein, 1986; Scheff, 1980; Stroebe and Stroebe, 1987.

Most commonly in this literature, grief is understood as a private emotional experience with a predictable symptomatology. The "working through," so to speak, of grief is viewed substantially in terms of the intrapsychic attributes of the individual in conjunction with the effects of the timing and cause of death and certain demographic variables. In addition, some social scientists have explored the changing meaning of death. Social anthropologists, especially, have documented the important function, both for the individual and the group, of funeral rites, mourning customs, and general social structural features in moderating and managing the course of grief. (The classical perspectives on this topic are found, of course, in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1912/1954. Additional studies of bereavement rituals and other forms of social support following loss by death include Blauner, 1966; Gorer, 1965; Habenstein and Lamers, 1974; Kalish, 1981; Rosenblatt et al., 1976; Scheff, 1979.) In these respects, anyway, grief scholarship has considered the interplay of social and personal factors in, and the historical and cultural variability of, the experience and expression of grief.

Nonetheless, outstanding limitations remain in our understanding of just how deeply the social constructs the inner world of the mourner (cf. Lofland, 1985) and, concomitantly, his or her potential to withstand major loss with reasonable resiliency and to arrive at a reasonable state of restoration over time. Specifically, students of bereavement as it is experienced in our own contemporary society have by and large failed to consider that intimate bonds are both more widespread and complex than is conventionally imagined, and on that account, have also failed to recognize that the loss of an intimate other does not necessarily carry with it the social confirmation of the very right to grieve.

My concern here is with the ways that grief feelings and their behavioral manifestations are actually socially regulated so as to either permit or deny the individual mourner access to a socially legitimate grief role. Such access indicates social comprehension and validation of the meaning of loss to the bereaved individual. It also establishes a benign social milieu that recognizes and makes allowances for the dysfunction and incapacity of the grieving person following a major relationship loss. For these