Analysing consolationscapes

Jedan, Christoph

Published in:
Consolationscapes in the face of loss

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

Conclusion

Analysing consolationscapes

Christoph Jedan

On two counts, the present collection's scholarly ambition is timely and challenging. First, consolation has fallen off the West's cultural radar, so that we are in danger of not 'getting' it. This neglect or misunderstanding of consolation extends right into today's academic scholarship. The philosopher Thomas Attig's excellent book *How We Grieve: Relearning the World* (2011) is a case in point. Building on Colin Murray Parkes' ideas that grieving involves a loss of the assumptive world and that the bereaved need to 'relearn the world', Attig's book demonstrates with a rich phenomenology that adjusting to loss is far more than an abstract cognitive process; it involves every facet of our being-in-the-world. Yet consolation plays only a marginal role in that book. In the few passing references, consolation is regularly married to religious beliefs, often with a ring of insincerity and ineffectiveness. The story of the death of six-year-old Bobby is a case in point: 'The funeral seems but a necessary formality. A minister attempts to offer peace and consolation through words that Ed and Elise hear as but a string of meaningless clichés and platitudes' (2011: 101–102). If we were to follow such interpretative templates, consolation might appear to be a 'toxic brand' in the cultural situation of the early twenty-first century. The neglect of consolation has been rightly highlighted by Dennis Klass. 'Consolation,' he writes, 'is grief's traditional amelioration, but contemporary bereavement theory lacks a conceptual framework to include it' (Klass, unpublished). Klass himself suggests a highly valuable tripartite framework to fill the lacuna (Klass 1993; 2006; 2014), and I regard my own Four-Axis Model, presented in Chapter 1, as a complementary attempt to bring to such frameworks a stronger emphasis on the historical experience than has been brought to date.

Second, many of the humanities disciplines have witnessed a veritable 'spatial turn', so that more researchers than ever before recognise spatial constellations as key to the phenomena they describe. Once again, the death of six-year-old Bobby as related in Thomas Attig's *How We Grieve* is a good example. Attig describes how Bobby's death haunts his father Ed 'in every corner of the house' (2011: 102), rendering certain rooms too painful to enter, and the sight of Bobby's toys too upsetting for them to be left lying around. The entire case-study abounds with spatial vocabulary:

When Ed and Elise return home first from the hospital where Bobby has died and later from Bobby's funeral and burial, they face a world that is changed utterly by what has happened. They can never experience, or be at home in, that world in the same way they were prior to Bobby's death. They are reminded of Bobby's absence everywhere, by the things he has left behind, in the places where they shared life with him, in interaction with one another and with others who survive with them, and in their own minds and hearts where they came to know and love him. Relearning their worlds is not simply a matter of registering Bobby's absence or taking in new information about the world as it is now without him. It is a struggle to discover, and make their own, ways of going on without him in that world.

(Attig 2011: 105)

The concept of 'relearning the world' obviously has spatial aspects and lends itself to analysis from a spatial perspective. However, researchers from the humanities have been slow to extrapolate higher-level spatial frameworks of bereavement from their idiographic descriptions. Avril Maddrell's framework of three grief/consolation spaces brings the much-needed systematicity to idiographic descriptions. Her model is not the only spatial framework around, but – as I can testify from my attempts to apply it in Chapter 1 – it is an eminently useful one.

In short, what is needed today are analyses of *consolationscapes*, i.e. analyses of the many ways in which consolation and spatial constellations are intertwined and historically inflected. This is exactly what Avril Maddrell, Eric Venbrux and I have envisaged with the present volume. Analyses of consolationscapes will not only show with concrete case studies how consolation and space intersect; they will also demonstrate by their results that consolation is still a fertile concept for analysing human responses to losses, to those past as well as to those present.

As editors, Avril Maddrell, Eric Venbrux and I have taken care not to limit the discussions in this volume. The authors were not asked to relate to and/or comment on the conceptual frameworks proposed by Avril Maddrell and me. While we are convinced that the frameworks will prove useful for future research, we felt it important not to foreclose other perspectives in a volume that attempts to break fresh ground. This opens up delightful possibilities of conversation about the theoretical frameworks contained in the first section of this book, and about the case-studies in its second and third sections. It is tempting to speculate what new questions might be generated by the conceptual frameworks proposed in the volume, and how emphases in the specific case-studies might change on their base.

In Chapter 10, for instance, Ruth Evans, Sophie Bowlby, Jane Ribbens McCarthy, Joséphine Wouango and Fatou Kébé put Klass's tripartite framework to excellent use. In so doing, they highlight 'religious' formulas such as 'It's God's will', which could be analysed with the Four-Axis Model as

invoking a 'healing' world-view and view of death in particular (death as under God's control, the deceased being looked after by God). Axis 3 of the Four-Axis Model, however, does not single out any religious motifs. The question suggested by a comparison between that model and Chapter 10 is this: Are there any other, not so overtly 'religious' world-view elements invoked by the interviewees? If there are none or if their presence is not very conspicuous, how can the researchers account for their absence? Comparison between the Four-Axis Model and Chapter 10 also suggests other interesting questions: What are the ideals of acceptable grief informing the interviewees' answers? Are there explicit descriptions of such an ideal in their answers (Axis 1)? Do we find appeals to resilience in the interviewees' thick descriptions of consolatory practices (Axis 2)? And, whilst memorialisation is highlighted in Chapter 10 as part of the practice of maintaining continuing bonds, Axis 4 suggests the importance of *inter alia* virtues, the uniqueness of the individual, and the completion of landmark tasks or bucket-lists as historically important ways of preserving the wholeness of the deceased's life. Are these ways represented in the interview material and, if so, how?

A similar conversation could be staged over Avril Maddrell's tripartite framework and the anthropological chapters in the book's third section. Her tripartite model distinguishes physical or material spaces from embodied-psychological and virtual spaces. Comparison shows that some of the chapters can be analysed as prioritising one or other of her categories. To take again Chapter 10 as an example, it is clear that by taking Klass's model as the point of departure the chapter's main emphasis lies on embodied-psychological spaces; by contrast, physical or material spaces – how they are perceived, demarcated and preserved by ritual, and so on – receive some, but arguably less, attention. The converse holds for Eric Venbrux's Chapter 7, where physical or material spaces and their role in ritual take centre stage. None of the chapters in the third section, however, explores in any detail Avril Maddrell's third category of virtual space. To me, this seems an important avenue for future research on consolationscapes: there is emerging interest in anthropologies of technology beyond the Global North (see Telban and Vávrová 2014), and researchers into death, grief and resilience should follow this line of enquiry lest they perpetuate as low-technology the exoticising depictions of the Global South.

Of course, such a conversation would not be one-sided. From the perspective of the case studies one could reply, for instance, that the Four-Axis Model emphasises cognitive and intellectual aspects of consolation. The model is unabashedly world-view-centric, and whilst cognitive and world-view aspects are important in ritual and in formulaic behaviour, one should not underrate the comforting function of repetition, sometimes even at the expense of intellectual structure. Moreover, even when accepting the distinction between three categories of grief and consolation spaces as a useful conceptual repertoire, one might maintain that in different situations the relative importance of these categories will vary.

I envisage, in short, an open-ended conversation that would be likely to lead to the further adjustment of idiographic case studies as well as to a further refinement of the conceptual frameworks. There is no way of knowing exactly how this conversation might end. All I can suggest is that it is important for us to engage with it in our cultural circumstances today and to try to involve other approaches such as psychologies of grief and bereavement – approaches that not only stand to gain from the concept of consolationscapes, but are also likely to bring fresh insights to the debate.

References

Attig, T. 2011. *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*. Second edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Klass, D. 1993. Solace and immortality: bereaved parents' continuing bonds with their children. *Death Studies* 17/4, 343–368.

Klass, D. 2006. Grief, religion, and spirituality, in *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, edited by K. Garces-Foley. Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 283–304.

Klass, D. 2014. Grief, consolation, and religions: a conceptual framework. *Omega* 69/1, 1–18.

Klass, D. (unpublished). The nature of religious consolation for the bereaved. Unpublished draft. Available at: http://www.academia.edu/2247617/The_Nature_of_Religious_Consolation_for_the_Bereaved.

Telban, B. and Vávrová, D. 2014. Ringing the living and the dead: mobile phones in a Sepik society. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 25, 223–238.