We wept and we waited – but what can we learn from the week we mourned the Queen?

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On 8 September 2022 the United Kingdom's longest serving monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, died aged 96, ending 70 years on the throne. Despite her age, the news was experienced by many as something of a shock, prompting an outpouring of emotion and intense media coverage as the UK entered a nine-day period of national mourning, culminating with the state funeral at Westminster Abbey on 19 September. As it happened, this change in monarch coincided with this journal's own transition of editorial leadership, providing a timely opportunity for us to reflect on the nature of public grief and responses to the Queen's death and whether there is any learning we can take from these recent events.

Who and what are people grieving following the death of the Queen?

Whether they fell silent, shed tears or queued overnight to physically pay their respects, it was apparent that many people experienced sadness upon learning of the death of the Queen; a woman widely admired and respected for her lifetime of dedication and service. In her age and familiarity she perhaps reminded people of their own parents or grandparents, and in the uncertain times we are now living through, the permanence and stability that she symbolised could feel like something to be cherished. On a broader level, many probably also empathised with the loss that the Royal Family had suffered, recognising death and grief as universal experiences.

People with a strong affiliation with the Queen may also have experienced a degree of 'biographical disruption' (Bury, 1982) and feelings of loss not dissimilar to the deaths of those known to them. Gibson explains how the 'narrative experience of continuity or blending between past, present and future is ruptured by significant deaths and these can include the deaths of public figures or celebrities' (Gibson, 2007: 421). Among older generations the Queen may have represented a connection to their past, while those sharing organisational affiliations with the Queen (eg charities, the Church, the military) or who identify with a particular version of Britishness and British history, may also have experienced the loss of an 'imagined' relationship and associated disruption to identity. The impacts of personal bereavement on identity are well theorised. In the dual process model the concept of restoration-oriented coping describes how people negotiate the practical and psychosocial changes to their lives that occur as a result of the bereavement (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). Neimayer's work on meaning-making similarly posits the bereaved individual as working to assimilate or accommodate their loss experience as they renegotiate self-narratives which are sufficiently consistent, coherent and meaningful (Neimayer *et al*, 2010). Suggestive of such processes in collective grief too, a study of fan grief following

Steve Jobs' death explained how in drawing on hero narratives and framing Jobs' life as one of genius and resilience, the fans were also framing their own lives in a meaningful way (Harju & Moisander, 2014; Harju, 2015).

Perhaps of most relevance to us in the bereavement community though was the apparent 'triggering' of personal grief reactions that occurred in relation to the earlier deaths of family and friends. Bereavement services reported increased calls to support lines, grief therapists spoke of the impacts on their clients, and in social and mainstream media we witnessed a public outpouring of private grief. Following Princess Diana's death in 1997, Johnson spoke of a transference of grief, prompting public grieving over other deaths that had not been properly mourned (1999). Kear and Steinberg similarly argued that the consequences of public concealment of private grief can find expression in monumental public deaths and 'communities of mourning' (Kear & Steinberg, 1996:6; Gibson, 1997). Although all grief could to some extent be considered 'latent' and therefore likely to be activated when we recognise losses and experiences similar to our own, the recent pandemic-context seems a further factor probably compounding this phenomenon.

In the study of pandemic bereavement we observed high levels of disenfranchised grief (Harrop *et al*, 2021; Torrens-Burton *et al*, 2022). According to Doka (1999) the concept of disenfranchised grief recognises that 'societies attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve' (p 37). During the pandemic however, this disenfranchised grief was caused not only by restrictions to usual death and mourning practices, but also by the de-humanising effects of mass bereavement, media reporting and public and political responses, which left large numbers of bereaved families feeling that their deaths had been reduced to statistics, and unable to 'properly' grieve and remember the person(s) who had been lost (Torrens-Burton *et al*, 2022; Harrop *et al*, 2021). Butler also problematised 'Western' norms of what counts as a 'grievable' life, arguing that disparity over whose lives are grieved and thus deemed worthy of acknowledgement and value, leads to the dehumanising effects of silence and non-recognition of lives and deaths in marginal communities at home (in the USA) and in other countries experiencing conflict connected with US policy (2003; 2004; 2009).

Unfortunately, the dehumanisation which occurred at the height of the pandemic has to an extent been repeated in media, public and political responses to the Queen's death, exacerbating feelings of disenfranchisement. Covid-bereaved families spoke of their anger and upset at public and media disregard of the Covid Memorial Wall while in 'the queue', tweeting the 'public ignoring of our pain being played out' (https://twitter.com/CovidMemorialUK/status/1570014670014263296). Members of Black Lives Matter and others fighting for justice for Chris Kaba, an unarmed 24-year-old black man shot by police on 5 September, probably experienced similar feelings of anger and exclusion when Downing Street cited the period of mourning as reason not to comment on the matter, and when their march was misreported as being in support of the Queen (www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/news/chris-kaba/).

How have people responded to the death and period of mourning?

The Queen's death provides a striking demonstration of the ways in which grief is a not only a private but a public experience, and how death and mourning rituals play an important role in producing social stability and managing the period of liminality caused by death (Pearce, 2019). People participated in widespread expressions of condolence, extensive laying of flowers, sharing of memories (of loved ones and the Queen) and talked of finding mutual support, comfort and connection with others experiencing similar emotions. As we write this, people are visiting the Queen's final resting place speaking of 'finding closure'. Also striking was the notion of duty, paying respect and witnessing history; it is thought that around 250,000 people travelled from across and beyond the UK, queuing for up to 24 hours or more to see the Queen lying in state or to observe the funeral processions. Participation in, or even passive consumption of, these events may also have provided distraction and respite from the ongoing political and economic crises; all political activity paused, the media reported little else and in the UK at least it felt as if the world stopped turning.

As Durkheim (1915) described, death and mourning rituals serve to reinforce social values, foster identity and build solidarity. As queue members spoke of honouring a life of dedication and service, the act of queueing came to resemble

a form of self-sacrifice, and in the relentless media coverage given to these events, the sense of moral duty and citizenship that was being invoked became difficult to ignore. In this respect not only were these public mourners finding personal meaning in their actions, through this 'fictive kinship' (Winter, 1997; Foster and Woodthorpe, 2012) they were also reaffirming the role of the monarchy in British life and identity, and the arguably deferential model of citizenship associated with it. In this respect this behaviour could be seen to exemplify what Harju has described as 'the constitutive nature of acts of remembrance', and a view of memorialisation as a 'process of signification' which serves to sustain both the relationship and the meanings drawn from it (2015: 132). In football matches too, remembrance acts have similarly been seen as a vehicle for the strengthening of allegiances and dissemination of cultural knowledge (Russell, 2006; Foster & Woodthorpe, 2012). Commentators have also reflected on the relevance and meaning of these large-scale acts of ritual solidarity in highly individualised, fragmented societies, regarding them as attempts 'to glue the social bonds back together again' (Walter, 2001: 495) or rectify societal wrongs (Berger, 1969; Foster & Woodthorpe, 2012). Walter's (2001) reflections following Princess Diana's death that 'rituals of mourning and remembrance symbolise hope, and occasionally despair … for a better society in which compassion and personal sacrifice will complement the profit and greed on which Britain's prosperity is based' (p508) seem more relevant than ever now.

However, if we recognise the constitutive nature of these acts of remembrance and the identity work that is integral to them, it is of little surprise that the cohesiveness that was being produced in mainstream public, media and political responses, was also met by feelings of frustration, anger and indifference. There has of course long been republican-based opposition to the existence of the monarchy in Britain, while the association of the Royal Family with a ruling elite, class system and colonial history sits uneasily with many individuals and communities across the UK and world. To the extent that these large-scale public celebrations/acts of mourning can be seen as reaffirming a particular historical narrative, concept of Britishness and citizenship (and the inequalities, hardship and suffering associated with it), the levels of frustration and upset among seldom-heard sections of society are

understandable and surely deserve recognition. Regrettably however, the suppression and exclusion of dissenting voices during this period (including the non-recognition of other bereavements earlier described) can only have reinforced these feelings of alienation, contributing to a diminished sense of national belonging.

What can we learn from these events for current and future bereavement research, policy and practice?

There are a number of possible learning points to consider. First, the familiarity and extent of official and public mourning practices reminds us of the social as well as psychological nature of grief and the importance of collective ritual, recognition and remembering following all deaths and bereavements. The triggering of personal grief reminds us also of the ways in which global events affect individual grief processes, in reactivating feelings of loss, loneliness and sometimes anger, as well as the possibilities for finding meaning and coherence. Support providers need to be able to recognise and respond to such events, and their impacts on longer term, as well as newly bereaved people.

The apparent ease with which people opened up to and connected with strangers was another interesting feature of this time, particularly when compared with the known problems that bereaved people experience with support from their 'real' networks (Breen & Connor, 2011; Harrop *et al*, 2021). Gibson (2007) reflects on a widening gap between media/technological death culture and 'real life' contexts of death and bereavement, and with reference to internet mourning sites acknowledges that it 'is amongst strangers or "virtually located" friends that they gain consistent support particularly when the time for talking about grief has stopped with other friends' (p422). The important function of online peer support spaces was similarly highlighted during our own study of pandemic bereavement, often also in relation to inadequate support from friends and family (Harrop *et al*, 2021). On the one hand this suggests the value of supporting and sustaining such spaces, but also our cultural need to address the deficiencies in the 'real' networks of support available to people, and the importance of community initiatives (eg compassionate

communities) which endeavour to do just that. Following this, it seems there is also an important opportunity to build on this renewed interest in and willingness to talk about death and bereavement; to continue the conversation in both private and public lives.

Finally, it feels important to also question 'protocol'; the appropriateness of political inactivity, cancelling of services, and cost to taxpayers at a time of national turmoil and fiscal crisis; the policing of dissenting voices and the apparent 'total coverage' policy pursued by many media channels, at the expense of other significant and devastating news items and more marginal perspectives. Rather than unproblematically reaffirming and privileging a particular historical narrative and version of Britishness, we should instead take the opportunity to revisit our past, give space to alternative accounts and engage in more critical debate over the cultural, as well as the socio-economic changes that are needed to build the kind of inclusive, democratic society to which the Queen also aspired.

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