

Work after Death: An Examination of the Relationship between Grief, Emotional Labour, and the Lived Experience of Returning to Work after a Bereavement

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Abstract

The lived experience of returning to work after a bereavement remains relatively under researched. Within sociology, the notion of emotional labour has been explored at length, but the place and experience of grief in the workplace is less well understood. This research, framed by Hochschild's work on feeling rules, focuses on professional individuals working in UK companies who agreed to discuss their experiences of returning to work after a bereavement, in terms of dealing with their own emotions and those of their colleagues, as well as navigating company policy in the area of compassionate leave. Qualitative data from seven semi-structured interviews were analysed, exposing key common emotional and experiential themes, particularly regarding disenfranchised grief, comfort in the familiarity of the work environment, and the impact of silent or awkward responses from colleagues. The emergent themes from the data were used to address the research objective of examining the relationship between grief, emotional labour, and the lived experience of returning to work after a bereavement.

Keywords

bereavement, compassionate leave, disenfranchisement, emotional labour, grief, work

Introduction

People often return to work having only had a few days off after a bereavement, yet relatively little is known about how grief affects the workplace (Hazen, 2008). Death is often considered one of the last remaining taboos in society however, as Hall (2014) reminds

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us, loss and grief are fundamental to human life, grief is ‘the price we pay for love’ (p. 7). Likewise, work is also a part of daily life for many and therefore has an important role in helping employees adjust to loss (McGuinness, 2009). Fineman (1993a) argues that emotions are within the texture of organisations yet writers on organisations continue to write emotions out of their work. He highlights the emotion-related language that *is* permitted within organisations such as ‘dissatisfactions’ and ‘satisfactions’, being ‘stressed’, having ‘preferences’, ‘attitudes’, and ‘interests’. But he suggests such terminology presents workers as ‘emotionally anorexic’ (Fineman, 1993b). This article explores the ways in which bereaved individuals navigate their return to work, how emotions are hidden or controlled and how interactions with colleagues, or lack thereof, are often integral to an employee’s grieving experiences. It also considers the notion of disenfranchised grief and the extent to which individuals and workplace policy often combine to create difficult and stifling environments for the bereaved. The article will be framed by Hochschild’s (2012) work on feeling rules, particularly regarding how her ideas intersect with the pressures of capitalism to restore and maintain productivity.

Understanding grief sociologically

Grief contains a personal as well as a social history. The personal is concerned with the emotional upheaval of losing a loved one, the social relates to how societal traditions and norms shape the experience and expression of grief. At the core of the social nature of grief is the idea that death is disruptive because our lives are interactional. We exist within a network of interdependent relationships and the loss of someone from this network is powerful in emphasising this interdependence. Thus, at the bottom of what we call grief is an expression of our fear of aloneness, a personal vulnerability that is further aggravated by living within a cultural framework that makes us uncomfortable to admit to this revelation (Thompson and Cox, 2017). To have cultivated a society that so customarily pulls back from grief seems at odds with the inscrutable status of it as something that we will all experience at some point. Indeed, Jacobsen and Petersen (2019) suggest, life can be defined as loss waiting to happen.

In recent times, there has been a growing movement within the psychological professions to define grief as a pathological condition (Granek, 2017). Sociology has had a strong response to this, arguing that grief is a natural human reaction, not a mental illness (Jacobsen and Petersen, 2019). To allow the logic of psychiatry to engulf grief risks it being framed as an individual problem that must therefore be dealt with individually, overlooking its social dimension and serving to solidify it increasingly as a privatised pathology rather than an emotional experience that is socially shared, shaped, and sanctioned (Petersen and Jacobsen, 2019).

Feeling rules

This research project was framed by Arlie Hochschild’s (2012) ideas on feeling rules. Hochschild suggests that emotional exchange is governed by deep felt obligation to such rules and that they exist at the juncture between ‘what I do feel and what I should feel’ (p. 58). Hochschild describes how feelings are a form of pre-action and so providing a

script towards them is one of the most powerful ways that culture can direct action, it is these scripts that she calls feeling rules. She also distinguishes between surface and depth acting in this context. Surface acting refers to ‘putting on a mask’ and displaying an emotion that is not truly felt, while in contrast deep acting involves actually changing one’s inner emotions to reflect the emotional expression rules they perceive to be a requirement in their work environment, deceiving yourself as much as others. (Miller, 2007). According to Hochschild, people actively manipulate their emotions to match the perceived feeling rules of their environment. This is a form of acting but not a form directed by the individual, but rather by the organisation that they are in:

the locus of emotion management, moves up to the level of the institution . . . Officials in institutions believe they have done things right when they have established illusions that foster the desired feelings in workers, when they have placed parameters around a worker’s emotion memories. (Hochschild, 2012: 49)

Doka’s (2002) ideas on ‘grieving rules’ represent an interesting juxtaposition alongside Hochschild’s work. He argues that every society has norms that frame grieving, that govern not only expected behaviour but also what losses one grieves, how one grieves them, and ‘how and to whom others respond with sympathy and support’ (p. 6). Grieving rules also limit grief to the deaths of family members, overlooking the complex intimate networks that we exist and operate within. Therefore, when one responds to loss in a way that is outside of the ‘grieving rules’, their grief is unrecognised by others and so becomes disenfranchised.

Intersections of the sociology of grief and work

Hochschild (2012) draws our attention to the problem of placing, of being in the right place to grieve and so being in the presence of an audience ready to receive your expressions of grief (p. 67). How we respond to challenges that we face often reflects where we are and the physical and social space that we are occupying at the time, and our workplace particularly can have a significant impact on our attitudes to life events (Thompson and Bevan, 2015).

Walter (2009) makes the point that for most people in the developed world, home and work are separate entities and so the division of labour that has led to this profoundly shapes how we experience grief. He suggests that following a bereavement an individual’s world may oscillate between a home full of grief and a workplace full of rationality. But, Walter says, although this oscillation may be expected, it is not always realistic – ‘oscillation is an economic and institutional necessity . . . But psychologically they may not be able to oscillate . . . Despite the lack of reminders at work, they cannot keep the deceased out of their heads’ (p. 408). Similarly, Eyetsemitan (1998) argues that grief adversely affects workplace performance because organisations often promote ‘stifled’ grief, that is, a grief that has not been able to run its full course. He argues that organisations poorly comprehend the different kinds of losses experienced by employees and that while giving days off for the funeral and immediate aftermath is important, this should only be understood as one aspect of an organisation’s responsibility. He suggests that the

emphasis should be on how to help the bereaved employee upon return to work, rather than focusing too much on the number of days given off, because there may 'never be enough of such days' (p. 478), time alone may not guarantee reintegration into the workplace.

Compassionate leave

While employees are entitled to take a reasonable amount of time off from work under the auspices of compassionate leave, paid leave at such times is at the discretion of the organisation and can vary enormously. Up until very recently there was no legal right in the United Kingdom regarding the amount of bereavement leave that can be taken (Hall et al., 2013). In January 2020, 'Jack's Law' was introduced which entitles parents who have lost a child to 2 week's statutory leave. For others, Section 57 (A) of the Employment Rights Act 1996 allows an employee to have 'reasonable' time off work to deal with an emergency involving a dependent, such as a child, grandchild, parent, or someone who depends on the employee for care ('reasonable time' is not defined and therefore also remains at the discretion of the employer). An employer does not have to pay an employee for this time away from work. So for many, compassionate leave is not a given but rather something that is discussed and negotiated at point of use.

Methods

The focus of this research was employees working in private sector professional environments. I began with a purposive sampling approach to generate a sample frame, which then led organically into a volunteer sample group. Initial contact was made with relevant gate keepers, usually HR leads, in a range of organisations that had been chosen to represent a spectrum of workplaces. I then asked whether an advert could be posted on their intranet portals asking for volunteers to participate in my study. The organisations that agreed to do so were two accountancy firms, a graphic design company, a bank, and one public relations organisation. All the companies were based in London and their size ranged from around 50 employees in the smallest company, to 250 in the largest.

Topics such as death and dying are not so much private as emotionally charged (Lee and Renzetti, 1993). As such, Butler et al. (2019) suggest that while such encounters can lead to a range of emotional responses, actually participants in sensitive research studies often feel it has been a cathartic experience framed by 'empowerment, emotional relief and . . . healing' (p. 228). My research design was informed by existing guidance on researching sensitive topics, particularly the work of Elam and Fenton (2003) who argued that qualitative approaches and semi- or unstructured interviews in particular are best suited to researching sensitive topics. My advert asked people to contact me via email if they wished to participate ($n=7$: male $n=4$, female $n=3$). The response rate was around what I expected given the nature of the topic. Sque (2000) makes the point that interviewing participants about painful life events impinges on many aspects of the research process, not least the response rate for requests for participants, which she describes as typically being very low and affected by a number of factors – 'The level of distress experienced by participants; . . . the need to talk, the willingness to discuss the

loss (particularly with strangers) . . . the willingness to “drag it all up again” (p. 24). However, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) suggest that it is actually advantageous within qualitative research of this nature to have a smaller sample because fewer participants facilitates the researcher’s closer association with the respondents they do have.

I arranged synchronous semi-structured text-based online interviews with those who agreed to participate. For the ease of my participants, Facebook Messenger was used to conduct interviews, allowing them to use familiar technology at a time and a place that they felt most comfortable. The interviews lasted on average between 90 and 120 minutes. The interview content was preliminarily guided by me, and I asked participants to describe their job, the broader details of their bereavement, whether they had taken compassionate leave, and if so for how long. After this initial questioning, I then asked participants to explain their experience of returning to work and asked follow-up questions where it felt appropriate, with the view to this part of the discussion being as free-flowing and participant led as possible, the preferred approach when exploring sensitive topics (Lee and Renzetti, 1993). It is important too to consider that these interviews may be the first time these participants have discussed these experiences out loud. Therefore, dialogue that encouraged reflections on, rather than just reporting of, their experiences (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006) was of particular importance here, with the emphasis being on how participants drew connections with material, social, and institutional conditions related to their experiences.

Data analysis was carried out using an inductive approach, based on Thomas’ (2006) definition of this process, describing it as being one that supports close reading of the data: ‘to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies’ (p. 238). Following this framework, the transcripts were read by me several times and emergent key themes were subsequently collated. In order to protect the identity of my participants, names have been replaced by single letters. At the end of all the interviews I supplied participants with information on bereavement care organisations in their area in case the discussions had led them to feel in need of further support. Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Applied Social Sciences ethics committee at the University of Brighton and the project was funded by the Research Development Fund at the University of Brighton.

Findings

Finding solace in the familiar

Several of my participants found that having had their lives turned upside down by grief, there was comfort to be found in the familiar routines and processes of the workplace. As such, their decisions about when to return to work were not definitively dictated by either company policy or their own emotions but more of a continuum of both. For some there appeared to be a limit to the comfort they were able to source from home and a desire therefore to return to something that represented stability in their lives. Participant K, for example, found quite quickly that she was not actually gaining much from remaining

within her family unit and so ‘might as well’ return to work, a matter of fact consideration rather than an emotionally charged one:

I . . . come very much from the type of family where whilst we do talk about emotional things, we very much come from the get up and get on with things ethos. So I didn’t have much time off . . . In that sense, work was a distraction.

It was clear too that while many of the organisations that my participants worked within had some guidance on time off allowed following a bereavement, many managers were flexible and open to their employees’ needs, as Participant F reflects:

I think my boss would have been led by me. The policy at the time was normally to allow up to ten days of special paid leave . . . in the event of a close family member dying to help manage arrangements etc as well as deal with the bereavement. I seem to remember I had 3 in total around the actual death . . . think I went in in between . . . In hindsight, I wonder if taking more time would have been beneficial but I was young and didn’t really know . . . There wasn’t pressure from my boss though – who was very supportive.

The option too of seeking further help through work was varied in terms of exploration and take-up by my participants. Indeed, for some participants, not seeking it was a purposeful act in terms of maintaining their professional identity, as Participant S reflects:

I don’t think I asked . . . my work were pretty hot on stuff like that so it would have been an option which was open to me. We also had an employee helpline which I could have accessed for counselling but didn’t . . . I probably, in all honesty, had everyone at work convinced I was ok too!

However, while many participants did find that their companies were sympathetic and had relevant systems set up to support bereaved employees, conversely some had quite negative experiences in trying to navigate their employer’s policies related to compassionate leave and consequently found this to be one of the more stressful elements of dealing with work following a bereavement, as Participant N discusses:

I just didn’t really know who to ask or check things with, I was in touch with HR and they were nice but often their answer to my question was to tell me to check with my line manager, and he would then send me back to HR and so on, I think in the end I just did what I needed to do and told each side the other had ok’d it!

Similarly, Participant J found that while his HR department were trying to be helpful, the lack of their own clarity in terms of implementation of compassionate leave meant that he was also not clear if he was ‘doing it right’:

They [his HR department] really did try their best but they just couldn’t really answer my questions, I wanted to know like what’s the longest I could be off for, what if I am ok for a while but then need more time off in like a month or so, I think I can’t have been the first person to be in my situation at [company name] but for whatever reason there just seemed to be very little detail attached to their compassionate policy [sic].

Emotions in the workplace and disenfranchised grief

Also present among some of my participants' narratives was the fear of being judged for showing extreme emotion in the workplace. Many did seem to find ways of dealing with 'outbursts' of emotion at work, either by knowing where they could 'hide' or with whom they felt safe to break down in front of, such coping mechanisms seem to have been absorbed quite quickly into their professional practice once they had returned to work, as Participant S recalls:

I'm sure there were times I was upset . . . but I would have extracted myself from a situation should I have become upset. I'm naturally a crier but if I can take myself off somewhere I will!

Likewise, Participant F likened hiding with coping, suggesting that if she was not seen to be upset, then she could maintain that she was not and therefore still play the role of the consummate professional:

I went back to work shortly after my dad died, people were kind but I felt also they [sic] clearly not wanting to get too tangled up with me, not wanting to ask me too much in case I got upset and took up too much of their time. So whenever I felt overwhelmed or like going to cry, I went and locked myself in the disabled toilet, longest I stayed in was an hour one time, even now after a couple of years when I walk past that loo I feel weirdly comforted by it, that sounds so weird doesn't it, but that small smelly space was just so important to me for that period.

Finding safe spaces in order to maintain a separation between internal and external emotions was something many of my participants discussed, since showing emotions at work, particularly the powerful ones brought on by grief, was almost consistently perceived as an insurmountable taboo by all of them:

Participant N: I would never let them see me cry, it's such a blokey place, they would probably be nice to my face then laugh about me as soon as I'm gone.

Participant S: I never wanted them to think I wasn't coping, I started to say I was feeling better already pretty much from my first day back, when I don't think I've ever really felt better to be honest.

Participant J: I just don't think it would have been ok to go on my whole real emotional roller coaster at work, it's not the place, I wouldn't want to see others doing it either so I definitely wouldn't.

These are just some of the comments made by my participants regarding their views on demonstrating emotional fragility at work – that it was simply not acceptable. There was no real critique of this by any of them and as in the case of Participant J, a clear declaration that it is the correct approach and that nobody else should be showing upset either.

Disenfranchisement was also a prevalent experience for several participants. Disenfranchised grief refers to those around the bereaved deciding what grief is

legitimate and the experiences therefore of those on the receiving end of the belief that theirs is not. Interestingly, Participant J seems to try to pre-empt disenfranchisement in order to minimise the impact it might have on him, believing that as it was a close friend he had lost rather than a relative, that he was not as entitled as those who had lost a family member to grieve:

I had only been at [Company Name] for about 18 months when [friend's name] died, it was a total shock, he hadn't been ill or anything, so I was really knocked off my feet by it, like actual real shock. A few months before, one of the other people at work had lost her mum . . . she found it really hard, had a lot of time off and people were very gentle with her when she was back. I guess people imagine it like it's their own [mum] and so immediately empathise. I felt almost embarrassed saying I was sad about the loss of my mate, because I guess you can have loads of mates but only one mum so I just thought they would think 'what's he so sad about, it's not like [colleague's name] losing her mum'. So I just tried really hard to downplay it, I had the day off for the funeral but it may as well have been a dentist appointment for all they knew.

While Participant J tried to pre-empt disenfranchisement in order to circumnavigate the potential experience of it, Participant E felt that her youth and 'weak ties' to the person she lost meant she found herself unexpectedly on the receiving end of disenfranchisement by her colleagues:

I was in my first job out of uni and was living in a house share in South London. One of my housemates got really drunk one night and he died. It was so awful, and because he wasn't from the UK we had to sort out so much stuff, help his parents, clear his room all that. It was just horrible, but when I opened up to some colleagues about it at work they would say things like 'oh but you didn't really know him before you lived there did you' or start telling me all sorts of 'funny' stories about their days of flat-sharing in London, like I was a kid moaning about something that happened in the playground. I learned after that that work was not somewhere to go for support.

Participant E's experience of her loss being trivialised by her colleagues, based on their judgement that her bereavement did not have enough gravity to warrant their empathy, encapsulates notions of disenfranchised grief and the persistent perception that loss and its impact exists on a sliding scale.

Awkwardness and the pain and power of silence

Many participants experienced either no conversation from their colleagues about their loss or otherwise uncomfortable exchanges, Participant K discussed one such encounter:

Some clearly found it mega awkward . . . I did have people put their foot in it occasionally. A week or two after mum's funeral there was the funeral of a first world war hero at the church outside our office window and one of my colleagues asked why I wasn't watching out of the window like everyone else, in a really judgemental way – but of course I couldn't – it was far too soon to be watching funerals!

Participant N reflected on the ways in which he felt obligated to smooth over uncomfortable encounters:

I had to manage the awkwardness with colleagues . . . in terms of when people approach you because they want to say something but clearly feel awkward and nervous about it, [I am] managing the conversation in a way that helps put them at ease – I don't know, probably providing quick reassurance that I was ok, controlling the length of the conversation etc.

It seems however also to be quite common among my participants' experiences to be met with object silence following their bereavement, as Participant L describes:

I had this whole speech prepared for my first day back, I was going to explain what had happened [his child had been still born], how I was doing, how [wife's name] was doing and so on, I thought it would be best to think about how to explain it all ahead of time so I didn't get caught out. But then I never needed to use my speech because not one person asked me about why I'd been off, not even a 'how you doing mate', not one thing. Was business as usual as soon as I walked back in.

I explored this further with Participant L, asking him about the impact this silence had on his grief:

Well, at first I felt a bit silly for having thought up a whole speech, like why should anyone care what had happened, it wasn't their family. But then you start to realise how much of your day is taken [sic] with thinking about it all and how distracting and draining that is. I did really wish somebody would let me explain myself a bit, cos otherwise some days I was just mega quiet and unproductive and then full of guilt and worry that my colleagues just think I'm a lazy f**k.

This idea of wanting someone to 'let' them explain their grief was a common feeling among my participants, a notion that explicit permission was needed for emotions of loss to be communicated and that grief was only allowed into the workplace if explicitly invited by colleagues. However, those colleagues who chose to risk the awkwardness and break the silence created encounters that many of my participants described as immensely powerful and important exchanges for them and their grief journeys:

Participant N: I think I had been back a couple of weeks when one of the admin team joined me when I was having a smoke. She just came straight out and asked how I was doing, said I must miss her [his mother] terribly and asked how I was managing back on the job. Till that moment I didn't realise how much I needed that. We met up a few times a week after that, for a fag or a coffee and just talked about stuff.

Participant K: My boss was straight in there, asking how I was, what I needed, said to say if things were too much, regularly checked in and stuff, even told me what it was like when she lost her dad, it was just honestly such a relief, I mean, you know you aren't the first person to lose someone but sometimes just having my boss, this super important person, talk to me like that, it meant a lot.

Participant F: I realised over time and after a lot of hiding that my actual colleagues were great. They were amazing, let me chat when I needed to, lightened my load, covered for me so I could

go home early some days but still never made me feel like I was a burden, I started to feel a lot more comfortable after that.

It is clear that what mattered for many of my participants was an understanding that when they do return to work they do so with their grief and so allowing this, acknowledging this, and actively supporting this goes a long way to cultivating an environment in which a bereaved individual can still feel useful and productive while also having a safety net beneath them should they need it.

Interestingly however, Participant S's experience of silence was quite different:

To be honest I hadn't thought much about people at work and questions and stuff, I was off work for about a week and on the tube on my first day back I started to dread all the attention I might get. I don't like being the centre of attention but also I just wanted a break from all the death stuff. But when I arrived I had a quick catch up with my boss about what I had missed and then pretty much picked up where I left off, hardly anyone asked me anything and it was a huge relief to be honest, just to be left alone and to get back to it.

So, for Participant S, silence from colleagues was welcomed, it provided a much-needed sanctuary, a protection from her own grief for a few hours. And this is really the key point about grief, there is no one way that it is experienced, and no one way that people wish to deal with it.

Discussion

Finding solace: familiarity, communities, identities, and architecture

Hochschild (2012) argues, similar to that which is implicit in Participant S's reflections, that the family unit is the place where one is free to be oneself. However, while home is a refuge from the normal pressures of work, it also contains emotional obligations, obligations perhaps most acutely observable immediately following a bereavement. Therefore, in this context, the workplace may become a place of respite from emotional responsibilities within the family. Participant S remarked that 'I just wanted a break from all the death stuff', therefore the emotionally sterile context of her workplace became a blessed relief from the intensity of the feeling work that she was participating in at home. So, while it is certainly the case that when people return to work, they bring their grief with them, work itself can also be healing (Hazen, 2008). For many people, their key social contacts and sources of support outside of family are located in the workplace (Gibson et al., 2011) and therefore returning to work may be understood as a part of the process of 'accommodating our changed interpersonal reality within our social domain' (Neimeyer, 2001, cited in Gibson et al., 2011: 11). Charles-Edwards (2009) agrees, making the point that work is a significant factor for many people in regard to their identity and therefore their well-being, providing much-needed stability and familiarity.

Participants N, S, and J all discussed how they did not want colleagues to perceive them as not coping, they felt this was important in regard to maintaining their professional identity as well as to the (re)building of their post-mortem identity. It is argued that the loss of someone close is also a loss of the part of oneself that exists in relationship

with them; therefore, a significant part of grieving is the painful reconstruction of the self (Jakoby, 2012). Hallam et al. (1999) suggest that survivors seek to construct a biographical narrative that restores meaning and continuity to their lives. The place of the deceased in this narrative can be highly significant, with the dead living on in survivors in a social sense and exercising significant agency within all areas of their lives. The imperative expressed by some of my participants to disengage with their grief at work seems at odds with these ideas. However, we should also consider Hochschild's (2012) argument that feeling rules have a stronger relationship to context than to specific emotive experiences. It is the expected response of our audience that then determines the feeling rules we understand we must observe. To believe that one's professional identity may be seen to be altered or weakened was enough for these participants to keep private any reconfiguring of relationships with those they have lost.

Participant F talked about areas of the office building that she felt more at ease to be upset in; these were generally far away from her superiors and areas where she was in relative control of the space. Similarly, Participant N's 'place' of solace was in the company of a specific colleague. Interestingly, Fineman (1993b) suggests that organisations have an emotional architecture, containing spaces where different feeling rules apply and where individuals can share emotions with people they feel comfortable with, where they are 'out of reach – literally or symbolically – of the performance expectations of those who supervise them' (p. 21). So, in these 'off-stage' spaces, hidden emotions can emerge – a moment of being emotionally outside of work while physically still inside of it.

References to familiar gendered behaviours were also evident here. Participant L's child was still born, and he expressed his surprise when his loss was not acknowledged upon his return; he explained that he needed somebody to permit him to discuss his emotions about what he had experienced, or else he felt he could not. Hochschild (2012) discusses the ways in which men especially must wait for ceremonial permission to feel and express grief, in response to societally sanctioned emotional standards placed on men. In the specific context of child loss, it has been observed in previous research that mothers expressed a greater need to talk about loss than fathers (Kavanaugh, 1997) and fathers at such times felt a pressing need to continue to provide for their families (DeVries et al., 1994). This may reflect broader societal understandings of men in this situation that, while at odds with Participant L's desire to discuss his grief, explains the wall of silence he was met with.

A distinction has been observed between intuitive and instrumental styles of grieving, the former a process of intensely experienced and expressed feelings, and the latter defined by a reluctance to talk about emotions, where grief is continually shelved in order to continue to meet work and personal obligations (Rando, 2010; Zinner, 2000). The instrumental pattern is most often used to describe the way many men grieve. The need to reject the help of others is perceived by the survivor as a show of strength, specifically ensuring others are not drawn by a show of grief to extend comforting words or deeds (Zinner, 2000). Indeed, Participant N highlighted the 'blokey' atmosphere of his workplace as a reason for not wanting to show emotion, for fear of 'othering' himself from that masculine culture that was such a significant part of his professional identity. Indeed, Martin and Doka (2011) suggest that holding back is actually integral to the male griever's identity – 'intense feelings of grief . . . represent a threat to the self . . . their

need to express their feelings and share them with others is overshadowed by a rigid definition of manliness' (p. 72). The outcome of such actions can be 'double disenfranchisement' (Doka and Martin, 2010). In not showing themselves as being openly bereaved, they are then not acknowledged by others as a 'fully legitimate griever' and so are not subsequently accorded rights to emotional responses from others.

Disenfranchised grief

This leads to one of the key issues among some participants, the difficulty in expressing the relationship between them and the person that had died. Doka (2002) describes disenfranchisement as occurring when 'grieving norms' established by society deny grief to those whose losses are deemed 'insignificant'. In order to avoid disenfranchisement, people must be afforded the 'right' to grieve. Workplace relationships often lack the residual knowledge and understanding about important interpersonal ties that we share outside of work. Workplace interactions tend not to provide space for the bereaved to explain the gravity of the loss they are experiencing, the enormity of the tie that has been severed, to explain the years of emotional entwinement. However, while the feeling of being disenfranchised by colleagues was certainly the experience of some of my participants, others appear to engage in processes of self-disenfranchisement, exemplified by Participant J who felt that because the person he lost was not related to him he expected not to be granted as much permission to grieve as others in his office who had previously lost relatives. Kauffman (2002) makes a connection between self-disenfranchisement and shame, considering a process whereby individuals deny themselves 'permission' to grieve by not allowing the grief to be real to them and so self-initiating disenfranchised grief. This relates too to Hochschild's (2012) aforementioned notions of depth and surface emotional acting, in particular her discussion around the ways in which organisations strive to alter employee's internal emotional worlds. Interestingly however, Meanwell et al. (2008) reflect on the possibility of self-directed surface acting, suggesting that while Hochschild privileges deep acting in her work, and indeed, while self-directed surface acting may be an antecedent to deep acting, it cannot be assumed that an internal emotional change is always realised. What is evident from many of my participants is that they actively chose to resort to self-directed surface acting as an act of self-preservation. They do not self-disenfranchise their grief at work in order to emotionally change how they feel, but rather to change how those around them feel about it, to minimise their colleagues' discomfort and preserve their own professional identity. In this way then, I argue that in this context their surface acting is not an antecedent to emotional change in themselves, but rather in others.

Silence: least said soonest mended?

Lattanzi-Licht (2002) suggests that, more than anywhere else, the workplace exercises significant pressure on bereaved individuals to be silent about their grief and hide the feelings it elicits. Alongside this, the discomfort associated with the concept of discussing death and grief can lead to a tendency to 'give people space' at a time when human connections are precisely what they need (Tehan and Thompson, 2012–2013).

Such cultures of silence are potentially as destructive to the company as they are to the individual when they result in time off or poor performance. However, silence from participants themselves regarding their feelings should also be considered here. Jordan et al. (2019) argue that such performances of emotional neutrality have a specific power and utility when dealing with bereavement. They explored this in relation to funeral directors, whom they describe as portraying emotional neutrality in order to provide comfort to those using their services. The inverse of this was observable among some of my participants, the bereaved were comforting the outsiders through their own performances of emotional neutrality. For example, the chosen silence of Participant F, who would hide in the toilet to prevent her colleagues from having to get ‘too tangled up’ in her grief, or likewise Participant N who went to great lengths to smooth over her colleague’s awkwardness with a downplay of emotion in order to not upset them.

Grief, capitalism, and individualisation

Also evident among my participants was the emphasis on it being the responsibility of the individual to restore themselves to fully productive employees again. Participant L worried that he would be viewed as unproductive or lazy by his colleagues if he let his grief overwhelm him at work, likewise Participant J expressed the view that work is simply ‘not the place’ for shows of emotion. Granek (2014) argues that the controlling of grief is always political in terms of disciplining individual mourners back into being productive, functioning and contributing members of capitalist society. Living the increasingly individualised lives that we do, we are most often held responsible ourselves for seeking answers to the challenges we encounter, and grief is no exception to this (Jacobsen and Petersen, 2019). The preference expressed by my participants to manage their own grief by hiding in the toilet for an hour (Participant F) or deliberately trying to downplay their loss as so unimportant it barely warrants mentioning (Participant J) is demonstrative of the notion that the ‘ideal mourner’ within the current capitalistic paradigm is expected to ‘keep functioning and producing in spite of their emotional pain’ (Granek, 2014: 63).

The short amount of time off under the label of compassionate leave given to all my participants (the longest of them taking 2 weeks) is indicative of a broader culture of reification within the workplace. I draw here on Honneth’s (2005) concept of reification, the treatment of people as things. When any pre-existing emotion-based relationship with others is forgotten, one’s surroundings then come to be experienced as lifeless objects and so the emotional needs of others are overlooked in favour of material gains. Like Hochschild, Honneth (2005) sees this as a form of emotional self-manipulation, the process by which we ‘lose the consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge . . . of other persons to an antecedent stance of empathic engagement and recognition’ (p. 128). The real human need to have longer than a fortnight away from one’s job following a death is superseded within company policy by a more pressing concern for the need for productivity to continue. But this is not a time limit that most bereaved people can accommodate and subsequent embarrassment at one’s inadequacy to do so has underpinned the experience of many grieving employees (Granek, 2014).

Conclusion

The idea that employees can leave their grief at the entrance of their workplace is unrealistic. Organisations that operate on the assumption that the workplace is grief-free are likely to be having a negative impact on their employee's well-being; indeed, social support can make a significant difference to the experience of grief and the workplace can be a major source of such support (Thompson and Bevan, 2015).

This study demonstrates the need for a broader engagement by organisations in dialogue around the importance of having a clearly defined bereavement policy, integrating compassion into working culture beyond being the name of a form of leave. It is crucial too to acknowledge the scale of diversity among the experiences of the bereaved and therefore the importance of treating those who are grieving as individuals but not then expecting them to cope individually with their grief.

While this article has focused only on the return to work following a bereavement, there are other types of loss that can have a significant impact on an employee, notably relationship breakdowns of various kinds. Such issues should not be considered less impactful by their absence here but rather warrant specific exploration in themselves regarding the experiences associated with them in this context.

Ultimately, grief will touch us all, work mediates most of our lives, to believe the two must not interact is to engender a culture of debilitating silence, a silence that itself has the potential to facilitate extended periods of grief, poor mental health, and low workplace productivity. There is therefore both logic and responsibility attached to the notion that public health policy and workplaces must do better to ensure there are clear structures in place to support and be present for bereaved employees during the most challenging time of their lives.

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