

Getting the object of grief into view: Ambiguous emotions in cultural loss

- **Cultural bereavement** is grief at the loss of “social structures, cultural values and self-identity” (Eisenbruch, 1991, p. 674) that can occur when a person separates from their home country or culture
- Initially developed through clinical and ethnographic work with refugee populations to pick out post-traumatic stress in response to refugee resettlement (Eisenbruch, 1991), ‘cultural bereavement’ has since expanded to include milder, more homesickness-like cases of grief
- The assumption behind the notion of cultural bereavement is that migration involves a set of losses that can be grieved in the manner of the death of a loved one

The object of grief

- Cultural bereavement can present a distinct problem for the griever, one of getting the object of grief “into view.” That is, griever may be left with ambiguous feelings that don’t clearly land on their intentional object
- Here is an example drawn from interview with Snježana Pruginić, a therapist and immigrant from the former Yugoslavia:

The grief was like, something was lost within me, and I couldn’t name what that was. And I spent time exploring it: Am I grieving my childhood? Am I grieving nostalgia? — the whole nostalgia of Yugoslavia, the whole nostalgia of Tito and everything. I still see that in my parents. Am I grieving their stories not mine because there are things that have been passed down? Am I grieving the fact that I didn’t get to stay and continue? ...Am I grieving all the pain, as you get to see the pain that your whole group is accountable for, then you’re grieving those pieces. Then there was the grieving of the pain that your group experienced that maybe didn’t get any public mic time. Then there’s a grief of that. Grief every time you go back and you think that you’re home but you’re not...

- Illustrates two ways in which grief can be ambiguous. Grievers may have:
 - (i) a mood-like feeling that lacks a clear intentional object (the grief is “lost” or can’t be named).
 - (ii) potential candidate objects, but it’s not clear which objects are the source of the grief or why.
- Ambiguous grief emotions are related to two similar phenomena identified in the grief literature: that grief takes time to “sink in” and that grief catalyzes our attention
- Immense life changes like the death of a significant person take time to emotionally “sink in” (Ratcliffe, 2025). We understand, in some bare propositional sense, that our loved one has died but we fail to grasp what it really means.
- Grief prominently features “epistemic emotions” like bewilderment, disorientation and alienation. These emotions draw our attention to their objects so that we can investigate them further.

- Both phenomena have to do with the complexity and scope of grief's object. A person at the start of their grieving process is faced with a sense of the immensity of the implications of the loss on the structure of their life

Ambiguous loss

- Researchers have explained the ambiguity of grief emotions in cultural bereavement by appeal to ambiguity or indeterminacy of the lost object
- Cultural bereavement is an **ambiguous loss**, a loss with unclear boundaries (Boss, 2009)
 - E.g., a family member with dementia, estrangement, divorce, immigration
- Such losses pose problems for the grief adjustment because the indeterminate nature of the loss makes it difficult to know which adjustments to make
- 'Ambiguous loss' comprises both *metaphysical* and *epistemic* ambiguity to the lost object (Ratcliffe & Richardson, 2023)
 - *Metaphysical*: the loss can be ambiguous because it is partial—the person or object is only partially gone
 - *Epistemic*: the loss can be ambiguous because the griever does not know the whereabouts of the lost entity
 - Many cases of ambiguous loss, including cultural bereavement, are both metaphysically and epistemically ambiguous

Ambiguous subjects

- Another way in which the object of loss can be ambiguous is evaluatively
 - Not in which features of the object have changed or are gone, but how the absence of the object constitutes a loss
- Emotions are relational and perspectival: they present the world from the point of view of our own goals and concerns (e.g. Nussbaum, 2001, p.52).
- Grief theorists argue that the loss takes shape against the backdrop of features such as the griever's self-identity, goals, commitments, or the structure of their life
- One dimension of the griever's identity relevant to determining the loss is who they are as an ethical agent. Michael Cholbi (2022) argues that we grieve for people in whom we have a practical identity investment.
 - One's practical identity is "...a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking" (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 101)
- Cultural bereavement poses a problem for homing in on the object of grief because the self-identity and concerns which normally backdrop grief are in the midst of change.
- Leaving one's home country can be a transformative experience: an experience that (i) teaches you something you could not have known prior to having the experience and (ii) changes your core values and preferences (Paul 2014)

"It was more than culture shock. It was a spiritual crisis. By that I mean at the deepest level of myself – a crisis of identity, of self, of meaning... In hindsight I understand it was part of the experience of being a new immigrant, it was the most serious thing I've had to overcome...because in a way I lost part of myself during that time of emotional struggle and

at the same time I grew into someone new.” (Kapka Kassabova, 2001, pp. 130-133, quoted in Kerrisk, 2010)

- One component of personal transformation especially relevant to the cultural bereavement case is “normative transformation,” that is, a transformation to one’s defining projects and commitments (Markovic, 2024)
- The question of how to rebuild one’s life in a new country is also a normative question, about how you want to guide your life ethically going forward.
- Because you as an ethical subject are still in the midst of change, you lack a stable background against which to determine the significance of the loss
- Helps to explain why a griever may have many candidate objects of grief, but be unsure of which ones she is actually grieving

Radical Hope

- We can understand the structure of ambiguous cultural grief by analogy to certain kinds of hope, particularly radical hope
- “Radical hope” is hope for an outcome that the agent doesn’t currently have the capacity to understand (Lear, 2006). Developed in the context of a case study of cultural devastation:
 - Crow chief, Plenty Coups, recounts the loss of meaning and culture faced by the Crow at the turn of the 19th century. Tribal warfare was illegal, and most of the game previously hunted by the nation had been killed. The Crow faced not only the loss of culture—rituals and practices—but the loss of their world, the loss of the field of possibilities in which their life made sense.
 - Lear describes Plenty Coups as having radical hope, hope for something that one doesn’t yet have the conceptual resources to understand
- “Plenty Coups’s dream held out for the Crow the hope that if they followed the wisdom of the chickadee (whatever that would come to mean) they would survive (whatever that would come to mean) and hold onto their lands (whatever that would come to mean).” (Lear, 2006, p.141)
- The hope is directed to a (more or less) specific outcome—surviving and holding onto one’s land. But it’s “radical” because the way in which that outcome takes shape is not at all clear at the time the agent hopes for it. Lear claims that Plenty Coups “lacks the concepts” to understand the outcome.
 - E.g. what it means to “hold onto one’s land” when one is travelling freely across it vs. when individual members of the tribe hold property titles are entirely different things.
- A griever of cultural loss finds themselves in a similar position. The object of their grief is the loss of home—the loss of home country or culture. But the background normative identity against which the notion of home (and the loss thereof) acquires meaning is in the midst of being interrogated and altered.
- A lack of clarity or ambivalence in our practical identity can reflect back onto the object of grief, leading us to be uncertain of its significance

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