

Academic Paper

Promoting Affirmative Grief

The Limits of the ‘New Science of Bereavement’

By Kevin Sludds



The author’s aim in this article is, firstly, to critique George Bonanno’s ‘New Science of Bereavement’ and, secondly, to offer an alternative analysis which he has dubbed ‘Affirmative Grief.’ This concept details how grief can contain a proper desire, heightens loving bonds and is future directed.

Introduction

In what follows, I will set out my reasons for believing the ‘new science of bereavement’ is, in two crucial respects, a misleading account of an essential human emotion. The leading figure of this ‘new science’ is clinical psychologist George Bonanno. His theory is a response to traditional, and generally outmoded, accounts

of bereavement offered by theorists, such as Freud and his model of ‘grief work,’ Deutsch’s notion of ‘absence of grief,’ Kübler-Ross’ ‘stage model’ and Stroebe and Schut’s ‘dual process model.’

Bonanno and his supporters have been hailed by many in the field of psychological science as providing a “welcome antidote to assumptions that have dominated

bereavement over many decades” Susan Folkman (Bonanno, 2010, p. ii); and his approach is regarded by many as “a refreshingly new and scientifically-grounded portrait of the grieving process” Barbara Fredrickson (ibid., p. ii).

In what follows, and when referencing Bonanno’s work, the use of italics is for emphasis and entirely my own.

The Mislabelling of ‘Sadness’

It should be noted at the outset, this ‘new scientific’ approach to bereavement draws on empirical research and blends it with anecdotes from ‘subjects’ to set out its hypothesis. The descriptions they offer, and the language they use, therefore, play an imperative part in bolstering their thesis. However, it is here we encounter our first significant drawback to Bonanno’s description of sadness. This assertion can be illustrated when we look at the three contradictory taxonomies he offers for this vital emotion. Firstly, when speaking of ‘subject’ Claire, Bonanno explains, she experiences “sadness from time to time . . . she let those *feelings* bubble up” (ibid., p. 14). He goes on to inform us that “one of the key *components* of grief is intense sadness” (ibid., p. 26). Of course, if Bonanno were here following a stated model of affect, for example, the Hybrid or Causal-evaluative theories of emotion, this point would be quite uncontroversial but such adherence is not stated. Secondly, he speaks of, “the *emotion* sadness occurs when

we know we've lost someone or something important" (ibid., p. 31); and, finally, these rather fractured descriptions of sadness culminate when he writes "the sense of a lost one's presence can easily tip our mood in the direction of greater pain and distress" (ibid., p. 142).

Accordingly, and across the course of his chief work *'The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss,'* Bonanno offers three quite inconsistent classifications for sadness: i) a feeling (i.e., what I take him to believe is a *component* of the occurrent emotional state designated 'sadness'); ii) a mood; and iii) an emotion. These flip-flopping accounts will be mirrored later when Bonanno attempts to describe how bereaved people move away from long-term experiences of grief by transferring "in and out of sadness" (ibid., p. 198) and both are equally misleading.

Bonds & Affirmative Grief

It is useful to note the language used by what Bonanno calls "the West where scientific objectivity rules" (ibid., p. 201), to depict bereavement. Grief is "something we are *wired for* . . . our reactions to grief seem *designed* to help us accept and accommodate loss relatively quickly" (ibid., pp. 7-8). "Sadness comes *equipped* with a *built-in safety mechanism*;" "Humans are *wired* to survive" (ibid., p. 81), "we seem to be *wired* for sadness, that sadness is *'functional,'*" (ibid., p. 96); and, "[Grief] helps people to *recalibrate* for life without the lost loved one" (ibid., p. 96).

When speaking of loss, Bonanno states categorically that grievers "*wish* it weren't true" (ibid., p. 114), yet, even here he fails to follow-up on the link between this "*wish*" and *overlapping* in emotions,

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despite telling us, "bereavement is a complex experience, if sadness is ephemeral, it is probably not the only emotion bereaved people will have" (ibid., p. 33). Against this idea, it seems clear grief very often contains a *proper desire* and is not always wholly negative; a point which better helps us to grasp the concept of emotional bonds and familiar expressions, such as, 'a nation in mourning.'

Undoubtedly, Bonanno is correct to reference the fact that grief helps "bereaved people reflect on their loss, *take stock*" (ibid., p. 96). However, when referencing the notion of 'tak[ing] stock,' it is essential to demonstrate just what this allows the bereaved person to do; i.e., focus on the future, something made viable only through the conduit of *appetition* (i.e., a 'proper desire').

At this point, it is important to introduce a distinction between the ephemeral descriptions of grief just outlined and '*affirmative grief.*' The death of a loved one is certainly one of the most painful of the many possible losses that can occur in our lives. The bereaved person can experience a period of profound 'quest-*ioning*' (lit. ongoing search) which relates to how they perceive themselves, the values and beliefs they hold, and the importance (or otherwise) of *life* in the face of their loss, together with a stark new awareness of their own inevitable demise.

The notion that most rational human beings have a vested interest in not being hurt, or not experiencing painful emotions,

seems to be reasonably uncontroversial and accounts for Bonanno's assertion that all emotions are transitory and that grief comes to a "stop" (ibid., p. 114) or is "let go of" (ibid., p. 140). According to the proponents of the 'new science,' bereavement is "essentially a *stress reaction*, an attempt by our minds and bodies to deal with the perception of a threat to our well-being" (ibid., p. 40). Contrary to this account, I will contend, grief can be felt over an extended period of time and not in the utterly debilitating fashion suggested by Bonanno. In fact, far from grief being isolating, it is often at this most difficult of times, that one moves closer to the others with whom one is emotionally tied in loving bonds.

Carol Lee succinctly makes the insightful point that, "grief so easily gives the impression of being a period of stagnation, but it is a time when deep, renewing forces are at work. These forces contain the potential power of our healing and of our ability to wish to continue with life" (1995, p. 119). In order to appreciate the concept '*affirmative grief,*' we must ask the question, can grief be a self-destructive emotion?

The common expression 'a family united in grief' draws attention to the fact that a number of people can share the same object of grief. Family members bond with each other precisely because their grief contains a *wish* (i.e., a proper desire or appetite) and is strongly linked to hope (a key future temporal dimension in '*affirmative grief*') and is overlapped by love. These emotions that overlap bereavement and "make grief more than one emotion" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 82) help the bereaved person to project into the future in a positive way.

Dwelling on the shared object of loss is not an evaluation of the

situation as hopeless, but one that assists grievers to express and commune with each other over the loss they feel. Grief helps us to deal with the stark new reality of loss. This period, then, of apparent passivity is often its opposite; for grief can help us to re-adjust to our new situation and it is during this period that we may come to re-evaluate our relationships, beliefs, goals and lifestyles.

The Fabric of Long-term Grief

It must be unambiguously acknowledged that bereavement is not simply an emotional response to an irrevocable loss targeted at achieving some apparent evolutionary goal of stress-free living (“bereavement is a stress reaction” [Bonanno, 2010, p. 40]). As one ‘subject’ made clear when describing the grief he felt over the loss of his sister, “She was a part of me, you know, actually part of me” (ibid., p. 137). And because of this overlap with love, so many grieving people experience a continued sense of bondedness to their deceased loved ones long after their death.

Our relationships to other individuals, and groups of people, has a profound effect on how we understand our emotional lives. Attachments built on care, compassion and love mould how we experience grief. Our behaviour, the intensity of feeling, the physiological changes and the length of time we grieve, are each directly related to how love entwines itself within that emotion. Goldie correctly observes, “Our emotions, moods, and character traits, broadly conceived, can interweave, overlap, and mutually affect each other” (2000, p. 235).

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everyone finds a state of ‘closure.’ Even the most resilient seem to *hold onto* at least a bit of *wistful sadness*” (ibid., 2010, p. 8). This “bit of wistful sadness” also means, of course, we don’t actually “let go” at all, in order that we might *carry on*. This “*hold[ing] onto*” exists for many people because their sincere grief is overlapped by a mature and enduring love. It is this “bit” of resolution or fortitude (not resilience) which allows us to ‘*go on*’ without entirely ‘*letting go*’ and is best understood as being sown into the fabric of a long-term experience.

Bonanno’s notion, therefore, of an enduring bond (i.e., “*hold onto*”) is, paradoxically, founded on the belief that to *carry on* after a grave loss, we must, in fact, “let go of a lost loved one” (ibid., p. 134), otherwise, we would be exposed to being “overwhelmed by grief” (ibid., p. 131). The attempt is made here, as it is by many scientists, to neatly compartmentalise grief by saying “most people get over their losses” (ibid., p. 83).

Misleadingly, we are proffered two contrasting and extreme responses by Bonanno to how bereaved people react: i) “recovery from grief” (ibid., p. 95) which he links to the notion of ‘*letting go*’ and ‘*resilience*,’ or, ii) “the death of a loved one is nothing short of devastating” (ibid., p. 95). From his scientific stance, he erroneously extols those who can “*control* [their] emotional reactions” (ibid., p. 14). After all, for him bereavement is always “transitory,” a phenomenological experience we are hard ‘*wired*’ to feel but

which evolution has, conveniently, ensured is only brief.

But genuine bereavement is not a mere matter of ‘*getting over*’ or ‘*letting go*’ or ‘*stopping*,’ in order that one might reach the evolutionary aim of a ‘stress-free’ life. Rather, it is a fundamental change to how the bereaved person perceives and engages in-the-world and, in some cases, how their loss becomes an elemental part of their entire *Weltanschauung*.

Bonanno goes on to assert, “We don’t expect to find joy and even laughter *within* our pain, but when we do, it makes sense, and we feel better” (ibid., pp. 198-199). Here he overtly concedes grief can be overlapped by another emotion, in this case ‘joy’ yet, previously, he claimed “nature has provided a built-in solution . . . rather than staying sad for long periods of time, our experience of the emotion comes and goes. It *oscillates* . . .” (ibid., p. 198). This ‘*oscillating*’ is a reminder of the problems created by the various classifications he advanced of sadness. For the apparent “*in and out of sadness*” (ibid., p. 198) is achieved, we are told, by our “*switching* to more positive states of mind” (ibid., p. 198). He goes on, “One of those *tools* [to cope effectively] is being able to *switch back and forth* from sadness to positive emotions” (ibid., p. 199).

Within this vacillating account the momentous and irrevocable loss of a loved one becomes diluted to being termed merely “*taxing*” (ibid., p. 200); yet, contradictorily, grieving people we are told, “often find themselves *perplexed*. They find themselves pondering *weighty matters, questions about life and death*, and the possibility of a *soul*” (ibid., p. 114). And, “most of us . . . have *wondered* about the possibility of an enduring *soul*, that might live on in an *afterlife*” (ibid., p. 145). So, an unaddressed tension exists

between the descriptions of grief as fleeting and simply “taxing,” and grief as a conduit to reflect on the most profound metaphysical questions in life.

Within his staunch scientific stance, Bonanno, in fact, goes so far as to support the diagnosis that long-term grief is nothing less than a psychological illness, i.e., “prolonged grief disorder” (ibid., p. 110); “People who are overwhelmed by sadness get lost in themselves; they [have] an insatiable desire [i.e., appetite] to have the deceased person back again.” (ibid., p. 97). Given his rather myopic focus on evolution and function, it is little wonder the ‘new science’ has nothing whatsoever to say about common, though complex, human emotions such as, ambivalent affective responses, nostalgia or survivor guilt. None of these emotions serve a positive evolutionary function, yet each are familiar to people across the globe.

Conclusion

Within the arena of clinical psychology, the ‘new science of bereavement’ has gained popular support both from professionals in the field and lay readers alike. Nevertheless, it has been my contention there exists a serious and misleading analysis of this core human emotion. It is in both the contradictory taxonomy of sadness offered and in the misguided description of long-term grief offered. My alternative analysis details what I have referred to as ‘*affirmative grief*,’ a concept which recognises how grief can contain a proper desire, heightens loving bonds and is future directed.

I have attempted to show how George Bonanno’s account leaves unacknowledged the appetitive component, how it can contain a wish dimension, can be overlapped by love and can be directly related to our self-preservation.

Such grief is, then, not merely a wholly negative, isolating and painful trauma but, rather, an emotion which becomes embroidered into the fabric of the griever’s character

‘*Affirmative grief*’ allows the griever to recognise, in periods of reflection and reappraisal, the necessity of moving on in a way that is not damaging to him/herself. Inevitably, this is something they find easier to achieve with the support of the other loving relationships they share with family and friends and, crucially, with the knowledge that the deceased would also have wanted this for them.

Such grief is, then, not merely a wholly negative, isolating and painful trauma but, rather, an emotion which becomes embroidered into the fabric of the griever’s character, allowing them to adjust, without being overwhelmed, to the new reality into which they have been placed. ☺

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