

Title: Grief as a Socially Embedded Process: A Mindshaping and Narrative Approach to Self-Reorientation

This thesis fundamentally challenges traditional conceptualizations of grief as a simple, internal emotional response to death, proposing instead that grief constitutes a complex, socially embedded narrative process that extends far beyond bereavement to encompass diverse forms of loss, identity disruption and loss of life possibilities. Through integrating philosophical analysis with contemporary psychological insights, this work reveals how cultural contexts, social norms, and individual agency dynamically interact to construct and shape grief experiences.

Traditional grief theories—exemplified by Kübler-Ross’s (2005) stage models and diagnostic criteria in DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022)—conceptualize grief as a linear, time-bounded response to death that follows predictable patterns and requires “recovery” within socially acceptable timeframes. This thesis systematically dismantles these assumptions by demonstrating that grief arises from fundamentally diverse loss experiences.

Drawing on Ratcliffe’s (2022) phenomenology of grief and Cholbi’s (2021) concept of practical identity, I argue that what we truly grieve is not merely the fact of death or loss itself, but rather the disruption of life possibilities and relational structures that constituted our sense of self. When someone dies or a significant relationship ends, we lose not only that person but the entire practical identity constructed through roles, commitments, and imagined futures intertwined with that relationship.

Grief thus emerges as an extended narrative process rather than a discrete emotional episode. As Goldie (2011) demonstrates, grief possesses an inherent narrative structure that unfolds temporally through patterns of meaning-making, identity reconstruction, and world-

relearning. This processual understanding explains why grief resists standardized timelines and varies dramatically across individuals—the depth of grief corresponds to how thoroughly the lost relationship or possibility was woven into one’s practical identity and life narrative.

While acknowledging grief’s profound personal dimensions, this thesis reveals how grief experiences are fundamentally socially embedded through two complementary mechanisms: psychological constructionism and mindshaping processes.

Psychological constructionism demonstrates that emotions are not fixed biological reactions but constructed psychological phenomena acquired through culturally embedded learning processes. Following Barrett’s (2006, 2012) Conceptual Act Theory and Lindquist et al.’s (2015) language-emotion framework, I show how cultural contexts provide the linguistic resources, emotional vocabularies, and interpretive frameworks that literally construct what grief means and how it can be understood. Different cultures offer radically different grief concepts—some languages possess rich grief terminology enabling nuanced emotional differentiation, while others collapse diverse loss experiences into broader categories. These linguistic differences are not merely expressive variations of universal grief; they fundamentally shape what grief experiences become possible within particular cultural contexts.

Mindshaping processes extend this understanding by revealing how societies actively regulate and enforce normative expectations about appropriate grief behavior. Drawing on McGeer’s (2007, 2015) folk psychology framework and Zawidzki’s (2008, 2013) social coordination theory, I demonstrate how cultural scripts, social expectations, and normative pressures don’t merely provide interpretive resources but actively shape how individuals should experience and express grief. Through mechanisms including social amplification, emotion regulation, and culturally transmitted emotionology (Glazer, 2022), societies enforce specific grief timelines, intensity expectations, and expression norms that create powerful regulatory forces constraining authentic grief experiences.

Together, psychological constructionism and mindshaping create what I term “**Socially Embedded Grief**”—a phenomenon where individual grief experiences emerge from continuous dynamic interaction between cultural frameworks, social regulation, and personal interpretation. Grief narratives unfold not in isolation but within social landscapes that simultaneously provide meaning-making resources and enforce normative constraints.

Recognizing grief’s social embeddedness raises crucial questions about individual agency: if grief is socially constructed and shaped, how do some individuals maintain authentic experiences while others succumb to harmful social pressures? This thesis addresses this tension by examining how individual factors moderate social influences through the concept of **narrative stability**—the capacity to maintain coherent, self-authored grief narratives while navigating social expectations.

Individual differences in attachment security (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978), personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1987) particularly emotional stability and openness, self-identity clarity, and belief systems significantly influence narrative stability. Securely attached individuals with strong identity foundations and adaptive belief systems demonstrate greater capacity to selectively incorporate supportive social input while resisting pressures that contradict their authentic grief needs. These individual factors don’t eliminate social influence but enable more balanced navigation between social expectations and personal authenticity.

The thesis culminates in a critical distinction between two grief adaptation approaches that carry profound practical implications. The dominant social message to “**move on**” problematically assumes that healthy grief requires abandoning loss experiences, severing emotional connections, and returning quickly to previous functioning within predetermined timelines. This framework treats grief as pathological deviation requiring correction, creating internal conflict when authentic grief responses extend beyond socially acceptable boundaries.

Drawing on narrative therapy principles (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007), I propose “**moving forward**” as a healthier alternative framework. Rather than demanding abandonment of what was lost, moving forward integrates grief into evolving life narratives while maintaining meaningful connections. Consistent with continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996; White, 1988), this approach recognizes that adaptation involves not forgetting but rather reauthoring the significance of loss within ongoing identity development. Moving forward acknowledges that healing is not returning to previous states but developing new life structures that honor both past connections and future possibilities.

This distinction carries practical significance: grief becomes not a problem requiring solution but a fundamental human experience deserving integration into ongoing life stories. By reframing grief as meaningful rather than pathological, moving forward creates space for authentic emotional processing at individually appropriate paces, resisting social pressures for premature closure while maintaining social connection.

This thesis establishes grief as a complex, socially embedded narrative process that challenges reductive medical models. Understanding how cultural contexts and social norms construct and shape grief experiences reveals why universal diagnostic criteria fail to capture grief's genuine complexity. The distinction between “moving on” and “moving forward” offers practical implications: grief deserves integration into ongoing life stories rather than abandonment. We don't move on from grief; we move forward with it, weaving our experiences of loss into meaningful narratives of continued growth and self-reorientation.

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