



# Adaptation to bereavement and other challenges in old age: An international perspective

Jan R Oyebode  
School of Psychology  
University of Birmingham



## Outline

- Context: cultural psychology
- Bereavement: adaptation to bereavement amongst British muslims of Pakistani origin
- Dementia: illness perceptions in British people of Punjabi origin
- Conclusions: contribution of cultural psychology towards understanding of psychological adaptation

## Cultural psychology

- Bio-psycho-social frameworks
  - Bio - universal hard wiring?
  - Social – culturally determined
- Cultural psychology:
  - looks at concepts through the lens of each culture
  - assumes psychological processes may not be universal to all cultures
  - Assumes processes are mediated through specific cultural contexts

## Cultural psychology and bereavement

- Bereavement - the actual loss of a significant other
- Grief - the emotional response to bereavement
- Mourning - the culturally defined actions which express grief (Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson, 2003)
  
- Cultural narratives determine responses to death and bonds to the deceased.
- Religions form part of this narrative and include ways in which a person and community make sense of important deaths (Klass & Goss, 2002).

## Grief

- 'Traditional' understanding: phases, stages and grief work
- Emphasis on recovery, meaning severing of bonds and disinvesting emotion
- 'Abnormal' or 'complex' grief as deviation from the norm
- Continuing bonds seen as pathological
- Drawn from studies in mono-cultural industrialised 20<sup>th</sup> century societies

## More recent developments

- Greater acknowledgement of individual differences in adaptive responses
- Greater acknowledgement of wider processes, at family and cultural levels
- An acknowledgement that expression of grief, and letting go of emotional investment are not universal
- More emphasis on meaning making

## Meaning making - Neimeyer

Social constructionist approach, with a number of dimensions, each with research evidence:

1. Recreating meaning: search for meaning in the death + existential consideration of the continuing meaning of life for the survivor.
2. Meanings related to b'ment are integrated with/extended to wider frameworks for living: fundamental process, shift in aspects of worldview.
3. Meanings often personal but constructed in social context.
4. Reconstruction influenced by cultural discourses as well as personal and familial context.

## Integrative perspective Bonnano & Kaltman

- Context
- Subjective meanings
- Representations of the lost relationship
  - Including continuing bonds: i.e. the role the deceased continues to play in the life of the survivor
- Coping and emotion regulation processes

## Continuing bonds following bereavement in Muslims of Pakistani origin in Birmingham

- To explore the nature of relationships bereaved Pakistani Muslims living in the UK have to deceased relatives, and the effect this has on the bereaved.
- To develop an understanding of how relationships to the deceased are influenced by religious and cultural beliefs
- To develop an understanding of the influence of the context in which the bereaved live (i.e. being a Muslim Asian living in the UK).

Hanan Hussein and Jan Oyebode

## Design

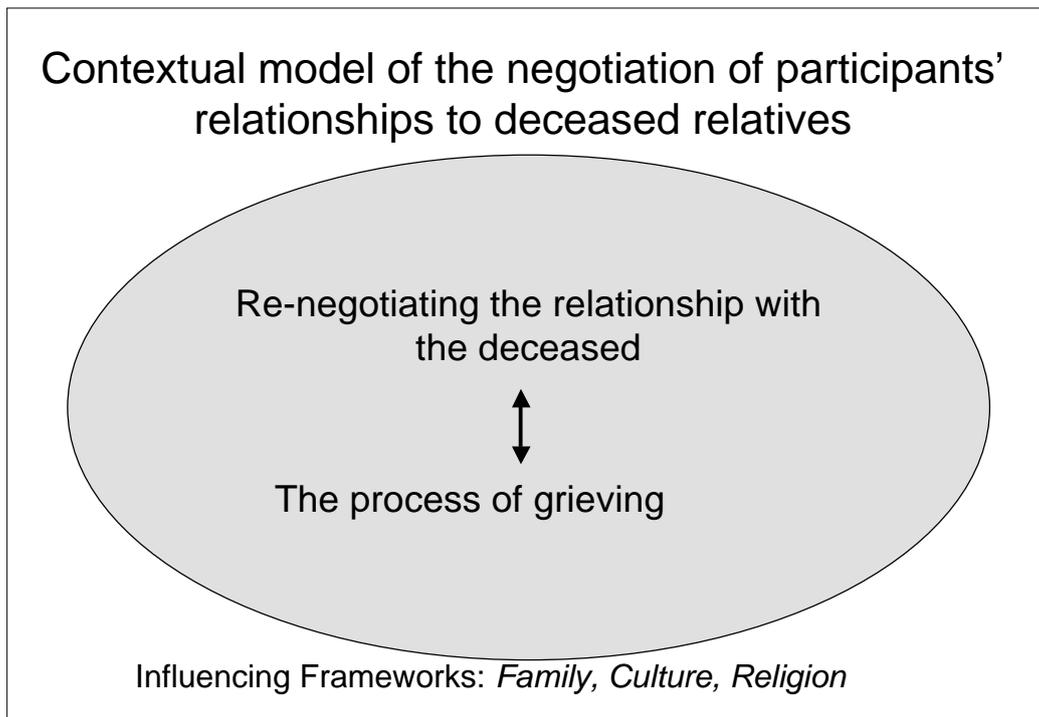
- Grounded theory
- Recruitment from local mosques, community organisations and personal contacts
- English as first or second language
- Bereavement 14 months to 5 years previously
- Bereaved of a relative but not of a child.
- Of Pakistani origin
- A practising Muslim

## Interview

- The relationship with the person when they were alive
- The way rituals around the time of death and beliefs regarding death facilitated/inhibited the relationship with deceased
- Similarities and differences regarding then and now
- Forms the continuing relationship takes, effects of these on the participant
- How the relationship is influenced by religion, culture, and living in UK
- Coping in general/regarding the relationship with deceased
- How the participant feels the relationship will develop in future

## Participants

- N=10
- 2 men and 8 women
- Deaths 2-4 years previously
- Included brother, brother-in-law, 1<sup>st</sup> cousin's wife, cousin
- Expected and sudden deaths
- Range of causes incl. heart attack, stroke, cancer, 'old age', 'illness', suicide



- ## The process of grieving
- Finishing Well
    - Communicating, *dying in a good state*, being there
  - Mourning the Loss
    - *Carrying out rituals, interacting with community, showing/blocking emotions*
  - Coming to terms with loss
    - *Making meaning, accepting*, moving on
  - *Learning from the death*

## Finishing well

- *Dying in a good state*

- *“I believe there’s life after death and that you either go to heaven or hell depending on what type of person you are in this life, and as a Muslim we have been given commands by Allah and we have to follow them, and if you don’t follow them...then you will go to hell, so it was important that for us when he passed away that he passed away in the state that he did...he was a good person, and he is going to heaven but we don’t know” (P3)*
- more religious, engaged in worship, seemed to have prepared for their death by washing, signs of repentance or signs in the body

## Mourning the loss

- *Carrying out rituals*
  - Washing ,funeral, burial, prayer gatherings (3/40 days)
- *Interacting with the community*
  - Large – expectations
  - *“It was quite comforting that we weren’t alone and that there were so many people who were thinking about us and thinking about my uncle as well...everybody was together and they were sharing the time, they were sharing their thoughts, feelings and emotions” (P3)*
  - *“I just couldn’t mourn with the people cos I don’t think they were mourning for him, for them it was just a gathering you see, they don’t know the loss the way we know it. So with my brothers and sisters it was different.”*

## Mourning the loss cont.

- *Showing and blocking emotion*
  - Expectation of crying
  - *“A couple of my cousins couldn’t understand why it wasn’t affecting me more, that my reaction should be greater, more emotional, and I almost felt for a little while that do they think that because I’m not crying my eyes out I didn’t care for my father? That annoyed me a bit...but they don’t know what it’s like when you’re alone, they don’t know...that you’re actually weeping when you are on your own, that you are grieving, but that you just don’t want to in front of them”*

## Coming to terms with the loss

- *Meaning making*
  - Especially sudden bereavements
  - *“One of the things well that a lot of people in my family are thinking is that maybe he passed away at that time a) because he changed and he was a better person and b) because all that was yet to happen in his family and he was saved from that in a way”*
  - *“and then the issue came up of her and the jinn, and er the idea that she may be possessed, umm that basically helped explain it, justify it...so I think that’s how my family dealt with it”*

## Coming to terms cont.

- *Accepting the death*
  - Comfort and strength from God
  - *“It’s basically God’s Will and we can’t do nothin’ about it. If God can give him birth and if God decided that no one else can have him, then He can take him away. But we can make sense of why he came into my sister’s life, because they loved each other so much God wanted to bless him with love before he passed away...but it’s really comforting to think that it was God who decided, because if it was a divorce or something or someone killed her husband then it would be far worse. But it was all God. God did everything and He knows best.” (P2)*

## *Learning from the death*

- Put priorities and important people into perspective
- Becoming stronger or having better character through dealing with the death
- Thinking more about their relationship with God
- *Wanting to be in a state in which God would be pleased*
- *“So when my father passed away I thought ‘I’m in no state to meet God’ at the moment, I need to fix up because I am not as Islam preaches and in the literature you do not get a second chance” (P8)*

## *Re-negotiating the relationship with deceased*

- *Repairing*
- Continuing the relationship
  - Dreaming
  - Talking
  - Following example,
  - Keeping mementos
  - *Benefiting*
  - Missing
- Projecting into the future

## *Re-negotiating the relationship with the deceased following death*

- *Importance and respect given to family, especially parents or parental figures – therefore emphasis placed in remembering*
- *Belief that these family connections continued after death*
- *“I don’t believe we don’t have a connection with our departed loved ones, I don’t believe that at all, I do feel we have an eternal connection and that we are all put together for a reason...there is something deeper to this madness that we call family, I really believe that there is a reason and an eternal connection there” (P7)*

## Benefiting the deceased

- Accumulating good deeds through on-going charity
- Knowledge which is disseminated
- Righteous children who pray
- *“I ask forgiveness on his behalf. Perhaps it will alleviate some of the pain he may be going through in the inter-space...I was reading about the consequences of the sins of the grave and how you're punished, and oh my goodness me it's so frightening, you know he really needs you now, now the prayers are said with different conviction and more sincerity, so in that way my prayers are different to when he was alive, and again I'm also hoping that I will get some of that thawab (reward) as well to help me” (P8)*

## Influence of culture

- Importance of community and collectivism - strengthened social support
- Respect for relatives, especially elders and parents – strengthened CBs
- UK/Pakistani differences
  - expression of emotion, timing of burial and extent of community involvement
  - Led to tensions

## Influence of religion

- Belief in the afterlife – led to stronger literal continuing bonds
- Belief in helping the deceased after death – led to a sense of being able to take action, to contribute and to make amends
- Belief in the importance of acceptance of the Divine Decree, based on a view of a benevolent God – promoted peaceful acceptance

## Understanding of dementia amongst people of Punjabi Indian origin in the UK

- To explore the conceptualisation of ageing and associated mental health problems, in particular awareness and understanding of dementia, among South Asian people of Punjabi Indian origin in the UK.
- With Jyoti Ahuja, Jenny LaFontaine, Nicola Bradbury and Sue Phillips

## Cultural psychology and dementia

- Impact of illness representations and health beliefs on:
  - adaptation to illness
  - help seeking
  - compliance with treatment
- South Asian older people are under-represented in UK mental health services
- Possibly due to clash of models of understanding
- Greater knowledge is needed about awareness and conceptualisation of symptoms of dementia.

## Study

- Generation based focus groups
- 49 English, Hindi and Punjabi-speaking British South Asians, aged 17 – 60s
- Phase 1: views of ageing and ageing-associated difficulties.
- Phase 2: vignettes of dementia for more specific exploration of awareness and understanding of dementia.
- Thematic analysis.

## Views of age associated difficulties and dementia

- A time of withdrawal and isolation
- Problems physical or emotional
- Cognitive impairment seldom mentioned
- General difficulties a result of:
  - lack of effort by the person
  - lack of family care
- Mild dementia vignette:
  - Causes: physical (diabetes?), emotional (depression or shock) or social (family neglect)
- Severe dementia:
  - Causes as emotional, social, ageing, attitude or personality
  - *'Some people just like others to do things for them, it's their attitude'* *'Some people are like that – they never appreciate what others do for them'*
- No mention of brain deterioration for mild or severe dementia

## Solutions

- People should be able to overcome their problems
- Family action might be part of the solution.
- Sense of stigma and a lack of knowledge about mental illness and services
- Disillusionment with doctors and exclusion from services.
- Mild dementia: self help, family help, doctor for diabetes
- Severe dementia: self help, family help, 'nothing can be done'

## Influence of culture

- Strong self help ethos in younger as well as older generations
- Strong emphasis on family milieu as a source of problems and of solutions
- Note differences from the wider UK culture of the welfare state
- Attitudes of self reliance being passed from generation to generation and being perpetuated by sense of exclusion from services.

## Cultural similarities

- Stoical acceptance
- Need for moral fibre
- Health as being functionally active
- Dementia as part of normal ageing

## International perspective

- Biological and social/cultural factors influence our psychology, our beliefs, sense of control, ways of coping and ultimately our adjustment
- Qualitative inductive research grounded in cultural contexts can help to tell us about the nature of the water in which we fish swim
- Understanding similarities and differences helps understanding of how psychology develops in response to both innate and cultural influences

Thank you for listening

- [j.r.oyebode@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.r.oyebode@bham.ac.uk)