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Beyond Letting Go and Moving On:

New Perspectives on Organizational Death, Loss and Grief

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Abstract

Understandings of organizational death, a term used to describe events including downsizing, site closure and business failure, are dominated by psychological stage models that promote letting go as a solution to collective loss. This approach neglects the empirical and conceptual shift which has transformed understandings of bereavement at the individual level through the theory of continuing bonds. This is the consequence of: *i) a managerialist* focus on grief as a problem to be solved; *ii) a cultural* orientation that constructs relationships between life and death, self and others, positive and negative emotions in dualistic terms and; *iii) an empirical* emphasis on North American organizations. We conclude by suggesting how a continuing bonds perspective could enhance understandings of organizational death as a cultural phenomenon that is fundamental to the construction of meaning.

KEYWORDS: *Organization; death; grief; loss; change; resistance; closure; downsizing; restructuring*

Introduction

While the literature on organizational change is largely silent concerning issues of loss and grief, those studies that have addressed these dynamics suggest they can be understood as instances of organizational death (Harris & Sutton, 1986; Hazen, 2008; Marks & Mirvis, 2001; Marris, 1974; Sutton, 1983, 1987; Zell, 2003; Blau 2006, 2007, 2008). However, conceptualization of organizational death is complicated by the fact that scholars have used it to refer to a wide range of organizational change events, including site closure, business or project failure, downsizing, restructuring, mergers and acquisitions. Within this literature, the concept of organizational death is applied in ways that are both inductive, based on the lived experiences of organization members who account for events in these terms (Milligan, 2003; Sutton, 1983; 1987; Zell, 2003), and deductive, measuring organizational member responses to such events by developing and testing theoretical models of the grieving process (Blau 2006, 2007, 2008).

While care must be taken in generalizing findings from studies of individual bereavement to organizational contexts, many of these scholars have argued that the reactions of loss and grief that such collective situations provoke are broadly similar to those associated with the death of an individual person. Theories of individual bereavement have thereby acquired the potential to inform understandings of loss and grief at the collective level. These scholars draw extensively on psychological stage models of grief which promote letting go and moving on as a solution to the loss, a way of managing and minimizing the intense emotions associated with grief. In this article we explore the limitations associated with this perspective which, we suggest, restricts the potential for management studies to appreciate the significance of

organizational death as a cultural phenomenon that is fundamental to the construction of work-related meaning.

We begin by reviewing scholarship relating to individual bereavement and loss, to consider the popularity of psychological stage theories in informing a late twentieth century view of grief as an orderly sequence of stages through which the individual must pass in succession. Next, we trace the fundamental empirical and conceptual shift that has occurred within scholarship on individual bereavement and loss in the past decade through the notion of continuing bonds, which asserts that the living can maintain relationships with the dead at emotional, social and material levels, sometimes long after death has occurred. This challenges the former orthodoxy that bereaved people need to detach from relationships with the dead in order to regain independence. We then consider why this shift in perspective that has transformed understandings of individual loss and grief has not had more significant impact on organizational death research. After demonstrating the ongoing dominance of stage theories in analyses of organizational death, we identify three limitations which help to explain why the notion of continuing bonds has not been more widely incorporated into management research. Finally, we consider the potential for alternative perspectives on loss and grief as a means of opening up new pathways for research and practice.

Stage Models of Grief

The social scientific study of death and loss is a relatively nascent discipline (Benoliel, 1994). Within this interdisciplinary field scholars make a tripartite distinction between bereavement, grief and mourning (Charmaz & Milligan, 2008).

Bereavement is defined as the survivor's status following a loss through death. It is accompanied by the expectation of grieving, a subjective emotional response to irretrievable loss that may be made manifest in mental, physical or social ways. Grief is expressed through individual or institutional practices of mourning.

Scholars in this field regard Sigmund Freud's (1917) article '*Mourning and Melancholia*' as highly significant in the discipline's formation (Howarth, 2007; Walter, 1996). Freud conceptualizes mourning as a functional process whereby emotional attachments to the deceased are severed so that the ego can become autonomous again and invest in new libidinal attachments. Normal mourning ends when the mourner reaches the objective conclusion that the lost object of attachment no longer exists. The subject must therefore neutralize the 'enduring pain of loss by accepting consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost' (Clewell, 2004, p.48). For Freud, when separation from the deceased is avoided rather than accepted, the mourner suffers from melancholia, a pathological state in which the loss of a loved object is transformed into an obsessive, aggressive attack on the self.

Building on these ideas, Bowlby's (1961) theory of attachment established basic principles for the early study of bereavement. For Bowlby (1980), bereavement comprises four phases: numbness; yearning, searching and anger; disorganization and despair; and reorganization, each occurring successively and giving way to the next. Empirical support for this model was provided through Parkes' (1986) study of widows' reactions to the death of their husbands. Parkes argues that grief involves successive stages 'which blend into and replace one another... numbness, the first

stage, gives place to pining, and pining to disorganization and despair, and it is only after the stage of disorganization that recovery occurs' (Parkes, 1986, p.27).

Understandings of loss and grief have been greatly influenced by interpretations of Kübler-Ross' (1969) study of terminally ill patients' responses to their impending death. Kübler-Ross suggests five distinct phases through which the individual passes in coming to accept death: denial, the 'it can't be true' phase, followed by anger, the patient experiencing deep emotions such as resentment and frustration which may be directed towards other persons; then a bargaining stage, during which the individual acknowledges the seriousness of their condition but tries to negotiate for more time in which to undertake desired activities or complete unfinished business. This is followed by the depressive stage, when the patient mourns what has already been lost, such as physical mobility, and anticipates future losses. Finally, the dying person reaches the stage of acceptance in which they accept the inevitability of their death and prepare for it, and in so doing achieves a sense of inner and outer tranquillity.

These stage models of loss have been widely accepted by clinicians and therapists and applied in a broad range of everyday situations such as the loss of a close relationship through divorce. Through their popularization, these psychological theories are transmuted into a fixed sequence which it is assumed the individual must pass through in order to recover (Walter, 1999). This helped to establish an understanding of grief as a pre-programmed series of behaviours (Silverman & Klass, 1996) which dictates that grieving commences at the moment of attachment or disorientation and concludes with acceptance or accommodation. It is recommended

that normal passage through the stages involved in making sense of a grief event should not extend beyond 24 months after the loss (Maciejewski, Zhang, Block & Prigerson, 2007). Stage models are commonly used to ‘assist’ the bereaved to ‘progress’, based on the assumption that grief entails effort or work. They thereby encourage mastery of loss and suggest that the individual must ultimately resolve it by letting go. The final stage involves the survivor severing psychological bonds with the deceased so they can form new relationships. Recovery can only occur when a mourner is able to move on, this being proposed as a universally desirable outcome. Deviation from this pattern is defined as disordered or dysfunctional, requiring therapeutic intervention to deal with unresolved, chronic or complicated grief reactions (Jacobs, 1993).

Organizational Death and Loss

The concept of organizational death has been applied in studies of change through downsizing, merger and acquisition, leadership, site closure, and project or organizational failure. In an early contribution to this literature, Marris (1974) suggests the concept of grief can be applied to many organizational change situations, from individual loss of employment to corporate reorganization. He argues that grief must be ‘worked out, from shock through acute distress to reintegration. If the bereaved cannot work through this process of grieving, they may suffer lasting emotional damage’ (Marris, 1974, p.27). This psychological process of adjustment relies on disentangling the dead from the lives of the living, to enable the bereaved to become re-established independently of what no longer materially exists. He argues that the management of change may be aided by the development of secular equivalents of religious mourning rituals and customs that have historically been used

to resolve grief caused by death of a loved one. Marris warns that if grief is not resolved through 'mastery', the individual is likely to become trapped in a permanently melancholic condition which is harmful to the self.

Subsequent researchers have supported the notion that organizational or site closure may be experienced as a death by employees (Milligan, 2003, Blau, 2006). Sutton (1983, 1987) argues that organizational death is a process which begins when the impending cessation of organizational functions is announced and ends when managers declare that this event has occurred. Based on a study of eight dying organizations in southeastern Michigan, Sutton asserted that the dying process requires that organization members accept the company will not survive and focus on the interconnected tasks of disbanding and reconnecting. Sutton (1987) notes that 'sadness and anger are evoked when people confront impending losses, including their own death (Kübler-Ross 1969), the death of a relative (Bowlby 1980), and the dissolution of a personal relationship (Duck 1982)' (Sutton, 1987, p.552).

A further application of stage models of grief is found in Albert's (1984) model for organizational transitions, in which he advocates that organizations must change by detaching themselves from their established form. This model consists of four psychological 'closure-constructing' devices: a summary process in which important aspects of the past are evoked and reviewed; a process of justification when reasons for termination are stated and defined; a continuity process, where a link is constructed between past and future; and a fourth process involving 'a momentary increase in attachment... akin to a eulogy... in which the value of that which will be lost is celebrated in order to create the possibility of closure' (Albert, 1984, p.172). In

the final stage ‘resistance to change will occur when an object of great and positive attachment is being relinquished forever’ (Albert, 1984, p.182). An ‘organizational funeral’ is recommended as a way of enabling members to grieve for their loss and to prepare for the future. For Albert, eulogizing the past must be managed sensitively so that expressions of grief do not encourage the prolonged extension of attachment but instead enable a sense of closure, thereby making change possible.

Harris and Sutton (1986) draw attention to the importance of ritual acts in helping members to cope with the affective and cognitive demands associated with organizational death. They highlight the role of parting ceremonies which function as a device for separating members from dying organizations, facilitating transition and integration into new roles. Parting ceremonies enable the socially constructed reality of organizational death to be reinforced through participation in a gathering where ‘members and former members join together to say good-bye to the dying organization and one another’ (Sutton, 1987, p.558). Harris and Sutton (1986, p.19) further note that ‘the process of mourning exhibited in the parting ceremonies we studied may also function to help “detach the survivor’s memories and hopes from the dead” (Freud 1952: 65)’. They suggest that rituals provide a setting for editing members’ displaced frames of reference and a context for emotional support in dealing with the distress caused by the organizational death, thereby enabling social bonds to be broken. Other research focuses on the emotions associated with organizational loss, including sadness and anger (Wolfram Cox, 1997). Expression of such feelings is taken as indicating acceptance, while those who do not display them are suggested to be engaging in unhealthy denial (Taber, Walsch & Cooke, 1979; Harris & Sutton, 1986; Wolfram Cox, 1997).

In a recent qualitative study of change in a US university department, Zell (2003) argues that individuals' responses to change over time strongly resemble the stages of dying identified by Kübler-Ross (1969). Zell (2003, p.79) states that 'both individuals and the organization as a whole moved through the process of change roughly in the sequence outlined by Kübler-Ross', adding that this takes place over a similar 24 month period to the one originally proposed in that theory. Organizational loss is represented as a finite process, with time plotted along one axis and progress through the stages of grief along the other. Working through the loss involves individuals withdrawing or disengaging 'their emotional bonds with the "deceased" so that a new identity in which the deceased is absent can be built' (Zell, 2003, p.88). Similarly, Cunningham's (1997) study of the effects of organizational disbanding, disintegration and death following the closure of a North American community recreational facility concludes that member reactions are similar to those experienced when dealing with the terminal illness of a loved one. Drawing on Kübler-Ross (1969), she concludes that those who can accept organizational death are more likely to learn from it and have the opportunity to grow. A related argument is made by Marks and Mirvis (2001), who observe that in managing the psychological challenges associated with organizational transitions such as acquisition announcements:

Many managers use Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of reactions to death and loss to illustrate their personal reactions to being acquired. Initially, there is denial and disbelief. Upon learning they are up for sale, executives go into a state of shock, denying the reality and their own vulnerability... People in the target company then experience anger... While expressions of anger allow

people to vent their emotions, many become stuck at this stage and are never able to move on to accommodate to the new situation... For those who can psychologically move forward, next comes bargaining... Only after time will people accept the reality of the new situation and be ready to work with counterparts in a genuine and committed way. For some, this may be a matter of weeks or months. Others may take years. Some individuals never reach the stage of acceptance. (Marks & Mirvis, 2001, p.88)

Recent scholarship has also suggested that stage models of grief are relevant to understanding changes in organizational leadership (Hyde & Thomas, 2003). Focusing on a case of the death of a leader, Hyde and Thomas (2003) argue that such events can be experienced as a loss leading to distress and anxiety, similar to the experience of the death of a parent. 'Adjusting to the loss of a leader involves the reconfiguration of relationships and meanings in line with new structures and realities. Adjustment includes attempting to preserve what was valuable and important from the past. A new pattern of relationships can then be established that involves acceptance of the loss' (Hyde & Thomas, 2003, p.1020). These authors conclude that for some organization members, reactions to the loss of a leader 'may become pathological as they fail to adjust to changed circumstances' (Hyde & Thomas, 2003, p.1022).

In the context of organizational downsizing, Blau (2006) argues that stage models of grief can be applied in order to understand individual responses to such events. He proposes a model to describe the emotional process that victims of organizational downsizing go through during and after a worksite or function closure. Citing numerous qualitative research studies (Latak & Dozier, 1986; Finley & Lee,

1981; Tang & Crofford, 1999) which argue that it is necessary for victims of downsizing to progress through the grieving stages modelled by Kübler-Ross (1969), Blau (2006) tests their applicability through formal modelling. This analysis focuses on understanding why employees move from ‘destructive grieving’ (characterised by denial, anger, bargaining and depression), to ‘constructive grieving’ (involving exploration and acceptance), during the closure process (Noer, 1993, 1997). Blau hypothesizes that victims who ‘remain stuck’ (Blau, 2007, p.407) in the destructive grieving process are more likely to experience strain, in the form of health symptoms such as hypertension and depression. He further postulates that employees who continue to grieve destructively are more likely to violate the relational and transactional obligations of their psychological contract with the organization. He operationalizes his model through a longitudinal 2-year survey study of employees’ responses to the closure of a site belonging to a Pharmaceutical company in the United States (Blau, 2008). It is an acknowledged limitation of the study that ‘given the predominance of downsizing research done in the United States’ the model’s applicability to other cultural contexts may be limited’ (Blau, 2006, p.24). However, the focus of discussion is on structural differences that exist between national contexts in terms of employment legislation, rather than the cultural relevance of the theoretical assumptions that inform the model or the value judgements that inform categorization of certain grieving behaviours as negative and others as positive. Blau concludes that while these findings demonstrate that Kübler-Ross’ (1969) ‘grieving stages framework can be successfully measured and then applied to job loss research’ (Blau, 2008, p.543), the study could not confirm the validity of the prescribed grieving sequence implied by stage models. Blau’s study was further complicated by the ambiguity surrounding the plant closure, which was eventually sold rather than

closed, and high levels of voluntary turnover, which compromised the longitudinal aspect of the study.

Grief is also suggested to be a negative emotional response to the failure of innovation projects (Shepherd & Kuratko, 2009) and the death of family firms (Shepherd, 2009). Shepherd & Kuratko (2009) argue that the grief generated by failure can obstruct learning because it interferes with the ability to learn from events surrounding project breakdown. They recommend the establishment of self-help support groups and parting rituals to enable organization members to develop coping behaviours and enable them to recover from grief. Shepherd (2009) defines grief recovery time as the period when individuals and groups recognise and deal with the negative emotions associated with loss. He asserts:

...the longer that people experience grief after their loss, the more they experience anxiety, agitation, guilt, intrusive (uncontrolled and unwanted) thoughts, yearning for what they have lost and depression (Prigerson et al., 1997). Prigerson and colleagues (1997) showed that such symptoms are related to negative psychological and physiological outcomes, such as depression and anxiety as well as heart disease, cancer and flu. It follows that faster recovery from grief over the loss of the family business generally promotes the emotional and physical well being of individual family members and the family unit as a whole; and so renders those individuals and group more productive. (Shepherd, 2009, p.82)

Building on his earlier research into the psychological consequences of business failure for self-employed individuals (Shephard, 2003), and drawing on theorists of loss and grief including Kübler-Ross (1969), Shephard highlights the role of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) in recovery from grief and recommends a dual process model to enhance grief recovery. This relies on oscillation between loss-oriented (confronting the loss and events surrounding the death) and restoration-oriented (distracting thoughts from the loss and dealing with secondary causes of stress) dynamics to speed up the grief recovery process. Grief is assumed to be a negative emotion which has deleterious physiological effects; acceleration of the grief recovery process is therefore desirable.

As the preceding review makes clear, a wide range of management researchers draw on stage models of grief as a means of interpreting organizational change events. They depict the grieving process as linear and sequential, comprising four or five distinct phases that organization members must move through in order to adapt successfully and prepare themselves for the future. Grief is portrayed as temporary, ultimately giving way to a new and improved situation. Therapeutic interventions and ritual acts must be managerially sanctioned to provide a temporary release from the negative emotions associated with grief so that employees can work through and resolve their suffering. In a recent review of this literature, Hazen (2008) acknowledges that medical and psychological models of grief are complemented by theories that emphasise the interpersonal aspects of the experience. In contrast to previous scholars, she suggests that maintaining connections with the deceased can be a constructive means of grieving. However, there is little sustained exploration of the implications of this idea for organizational theory or managerial practice. The

remainder of this article asks why stage theories of grief continue to dominate organizational analyses and outlines the potential for an alternative perspective on organizational death and loss.

Continuing Organizational Bonds

During the past decade scholarship on dying and bereavement has undergone a fundamental empirical and conceptual transformation (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). Stage theories of grief have been challenged by the theory of continuing bonds, which explores the complex and multiple ways in which the living maintain relationships with the deceased at emotional, social and material levels, through constructing lasting inner and symbolic representations, sensing the presence of the deceased, and behaving in ways that take their presence into account. These relationships are dynamic rather than static, evolving over time sometimes long after the death has occurred, and have been shown to have potentially positive effects on survivors. Continuing bonds theory challenges the orthodoxy that bereaved people need to detach from relationships with the dead to regain independence, and suggests that grief cannot be understood as an orderly sequence of temporal stages which the individual must pass through in succession (Wortman & Silver, 1989). It further introduces the idea that there may be no recovery from or resolution of loss and raises the possibility that grief and mourning need not be regarded as problems that need to be solved. Continuing bonds theory is supported by numerous empirical studies that suggest people can maintain bonds with the dead indefinitely, even while forming new social relationships (Walter, 1994).

Yet while sociological understandings of loss and grief have moved away from a conception of 'normal' bereavement based on psychological detachment from the deceased over time, analyses of downsizing, site closure and organizational failure continue to draw extensively and uncritically on stage models of grief. A similar pattern has been observed in relation to other areas of management theory. For example, classic theories such as Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs continue to be applied by practitioners and taught by educators long after they have been questioned in their discipline of origin (Cullen, 1997), perhaps because they are comforting to managers, or easy for management educators and students to remember and reproduce (Watson, 1996). Continued reliance on stage models of loss and grief may result from lack of awareness of recent theoretical developments in bereavement scholarship. However, the prevalence of stage models in analyses of organizational death may also derive from certain basic underlying assumptions that can be identified within existing research which can be categorised as managerialist, cultural and empirical.

i) Managerialist

One of the reasons for the continuing dominance of stage theory stems from an underlying commitment to managerialist modes of analysis which assume that organizational death needs to be handled effectively so as to minimise its impact on organizational and employee performance. This encourages a functionalist approach to grief which assumes that it requires careful management, whether by organizing memorial events or providing the bereaved with information that helps them to disconnect from the dead and reconnect with the new (Cunningham, 1997; Harris & Sutton, 1986; Sutton, 1987; Zell, 2003). Attempts to maintain bonds with dead organizations are therefore categorized as damaging to the individual (Marks &

Mirvis, 2001; Marris, 1974). Managerialist perspectives position the manager as a neutral, functional agent of the organization who is able to help employees to resolve their grief. This is encouraged by studies that rely predominantly on interviews with managers (e.g. Zell, 2003), who have an interest in controlling the grief reactions of bereaved employees in order to minimize their disruptive potential and potential cost to the organization (Hazen, 2008, Charmaz & Milligan, 2008). In addition, analyses based on stage models are founded on individualistic principles, discouraging attribution of collective responsibility for the death of the organization and encouraging individuals to take responsibility for dealing with it. This helps to reduce the possibility of collective employee resistance by encouraging conformity to a model of normal behaviour based on working through and resolving grief. These ideas act prescriptively as a normative means of regulating organizational grief experiences.

Analyses of individual grief suggest that cultural scripts are used to police the passionate emotions associated with loss through bereavement, which in many Western cultures are treated as non-routine and irrational (Small, 2001, Walter, 1999). This helps to explain why stage theories of grief have gained such popularity, as they form part of a dominant psychological discourse that serves to discipline people into appropriate behaviours (Foote & Frank, 1999). Individuals are therefore encouraged to overcome their grief, using therapeutic techniques such as self-help, and to take responsibility for managing their loss in a way which renders them docile through inducing conformity to a model of 'normal' grieving behaviour (Rose, 1990).

Studies conducted from a critical perspective (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003) could enable the study of organizational death to be strengthened by capturing the lived experience of loss at different levels of the organizational hierarchy. This would enable exploration of the power interests served by particular grief discourses. An example of how such research may be conducted is provided by Ainsworth and Hardy (2009), whose analysis of the effects of psychotherapeutic discourses of grief on the identity of older workers shows they are encouraged to deal with the loss of employment by moving through the 'normal' stages of grief. They note that this discourse encourages older workers to take individual responsibility for managing their emotional reactions to loss and to demonstrate acceptance rather than anger, thereby disempowering an already disadvantaged group.

However, despite the efforts of managers to regulate and control reactions to bereavement, grief can remain an empowering resource that may be used to resist oppression and exploitation (Holst-Warhaft, 2000). By sustaining the pain of grief over time and translating it from an individual to a collective level, disadvantaged groups can use grief to further their own interests and challenge established organizational power relations. While the dominance of stage models of grief can be seen as the consequence of an orientation that favours managerial interests, employees are not passive objects of control. Further research is needed to understand how discursive demands to let go or move on may be resisted. But as scholars of individual death and bereavement have noted, we must also be wary of the potential for any model of grief to become prescriptive and regulatory (Small, 2001). Consequently there is a need for caution in constructing alternatives to stage models of grief. Instead

we need to remain wary of grand explanatory models and open to the possibility of multiple, conflicting interpretations.

ii) Cultural

A further limitation of organizational death research arises from the deeply embedded, often unexamined cultural beliefs and values about the relationship between life/death, self/others and positive/negative emotions that existing studies have tended to uncritically reproduce. The dominance of particular perspectives on grief and loss may arise from cultural beliefs and values, rather than because of 'any substantial data relating to what people actually do' (Small, 2001, p.34). We suggest that dominant cultural attitudes towards individual bereavement provide the resources which are used to make sense of organizational events such as downsizing, site closure and business or project failure.

The first of these cultural beliefs and values concerns understandings of the relationship between life and death in modern Western societies, where death has been located within a framework of control and separation and policed by professionals (Mellor & Shilling, 1993; Howarth, 2007). This understanding of mortality seeks to abolish the dead from the world of the living through permanent removal to a place where they can have no influence (Walter, 1999). Life and death is thus constructed as a dualism, characterised by the creation of boundaries, with death understood as an absolute, irreversible end point (Adam, 1995). This encourages a predisposition towards stage models of grief, as a means of clearly separating the dead from the living.

However, greater geographical and social mobility in late modern societies is suggested to have stimulated new ways of relating to the dead. This has given rise to the continuing bonds perspective in which the concepts of life and death are conceptualized as aspects of a mutually constituting continuum; death is regarded as a different state of being rather than an end in itself (Howarth, 2007). Continuing bonds is founded on a set of beliefs that challenge the cultural separation between life and death through a refusal to accept the notion that death constitutes the end of existence. While death marks the boundaries of the human physical lifespan, when people die they are not gone because their identity leaves a record (Adam, 1995).

This understanding of the relationship between life and death has considerable potential to affect how we understand contemporary temporalities. As Adam (1995) observes, understandings of mortality are central to how we experience the time of life. Continuing bonds theory challenges the chronological view of time as entropic and irreversible. The dead are no longer so clearly culturally separated from the living, causing conceptions of past and present to become more fluid. At a time when organizations are becoming less clearly identified with a particular time and place, and organizational change is suggested to be continuous rather than linear and episodic (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), a continuing bonds perspective on the relationship between past and present is likely to be more meaningful to organizational members than the materialist, empiricist tradition of conceptualizing change on a before/after basis (Adam, 1995). Rather than positioning the past and its inhabitants as other, distinct and separate from the present, a continuing bonds perspective invites consideration of temporal unity and relatedness.

The second basic cultural assumption that supports the preference for stage models relates to understandings of subjectivity and self that these models support and reinforce (Clewell, 2004; Silverman & Klass, 1996). Charmaz & Milligan (2008) suggest cultural expectations of the grieving process in Western societies are conditioned by the Protestant ethic, which encourages stoicism, individualism and rationality. Anglo-Saxon cultures tend to promote a view of selfhood founded on autonomy and individuation as the basis for understanding the bonds between self and others. Within this, individual subjectivity is seen as self-centred rather than inter-subjectively constructed. This encourages an instrumental view of relationships as necessarily having a value to the individual; when a relationship no longer fulfils a valued function, it must be severed in order to ensure the individual's ongoing health and wellbeing.

However, this psychologically-influenced perspective has been criticised for supporting a view of subjectivity founded on hegemonic masculinity which tends to pathologize stereotypically feminine grieving behaviours through promoting a masculine model of mental health that privileges independence and autonomy (Walter, 1996; Howarth, 2007; Holst-Warhaft, 2000). It is significant that many foundational psychological studies of grief and loss are based on studies of women (Howarth, 2007), including those that focus on the collective level such as Marris (1974), who draws extensively on a study of widows whose husbands died at a relatively young age. These studies represent women's bereavement responses as more prone to psychological dysfunction through a failure to let go of the deceased.

The third cultural assumption that encourages uncritical reproduction of stage models of grief concerns the definition of certain emotions as positive and others as negative. Fineman (2006) argues that by labelling certain emotions as positive and assuming they result in beneficial consequences for individuals and organization, and marginalising others as negative or as sources of disruption or destruction, a separation is created that is both theoretically and empirically problematic. Fineman (2006) cites research evidence to suggest that experiencing emotions that are commonly defined as negative is a fundamental aspect of identity formation and a source of personal and social development. Applications of stage theory in situations of organizational loss imply that the emotions associated with grief are physiologically and psychologically damaging to the individual. While it is acknowledged that negative emotions must be confronted as part of the grieving process, the aim is to accelerate the process whereby they can be dealt with so that a positive emotional state can be resumed. Fineman's analysis highlights the cultural specificity of this kind of evaluation, suggesting that the current preoccupation with positive emotions and emotional intelligence was formed in the context of North American culture where expressions of optimism are highly valued. Failure to display positive emotions is likely to be defined as abnormal within these cultural discourses.

To summarize, these unexamined assumptions reflect deeply embedded cultural beliefs and values towards death, loss and grief and promote a continued reliance on stage models. Yet scholars in the field of bereavement studies observe that such perspectives are becoming less relevant as a means of understanding contemporary expressions of loss and grief (Walter, 1996). The study of organizational death could therefore be strengthened through more explicit

examination of these cultural assumptions and greater critical evaluation of their role in influencing analysis.

iii) Empirical

Finally, the continuing dominance of stage models of grief may also be a consequence of the relatively narrow empirical focus adopted by organizational death researchers. The majority of studies of organizational death, loss and grief have been conducted in North America and Western Europe. It is likely that organizational members, and potentially also researchers, are affected by the dominant values and beliefs concerning death, grief and loss that exist in these societies. We are not aware of published analyses of organizational death that focus on non-Western cultural contexts. However, several anthropological studies illustrate the cultural diversity of death and bereavement practices in a way which is directly related to organizations (Nakamaki, 1995; Ong, 1987; Wolf, 1992). These researchers focus on memorialisation, including the rituals that organizational members employ to remember their dead. Whilst these studies focus on organizational responses to individual death, they highlight the diversity of collective loss and grief responses and provide clues as to the presence of continuing bonds in death-related organizational situations.

Nakamaki's (1995) anthropological account of Japanese organizations describes how, when senior employees die, organizational members are closely involved in the funeral, through providing financial support or a focus for prayer. These organizations maintain monuments to high-status individuals such as company founders or former presidents, and collective tombs for other employees who die

while in the service of the organization. Such corporate monuments are maintained at company expense, located at sacred public places separate from organizational premises, such as the Buddhist site of Mount Koya, which employees are encouraged to visit as a means of remembering the dead. Annual memorial services are held to remember deceased employees. The presence of the dead in the ongoing lives of organization members can also be seen in Ong's (1987) ethnographic analysis of female factory workers in Malaysia. Ong's account suggests that employees regularly felt the presence of 'spirits on the shop floor' who represented former workers and work activities. Similarly, Wolf's (1992) anthropological analysis of industrialization in Java suggests that workers in a newly built factory sensed the presence of deceased agricultural workers trying to find the land they once worked on.

North American and European companies maintain continuing bonds with former leaders by displaying portraits of deceased founders and executives in corporate premises. Memorials to employees who have died as a result of war, terrorism or industrial accidents are also common. The UK/France Channel Tunnel and the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge have memorials to those who died during construction; London's Waterloo Station has a memorial to railway workers who died in service of their country in the First World War, while Deutsche Bank erected a memorial on Wall Street to remember employees who died in the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001. These practices bear similarity to the Japanese cultural practice of ancestor worship (Klass, 1996), evoking the presence of the dead in a way which constitutes this as a feature of current organizational membership.

Memorialising practices can also be generated by a variety of organizational stakeholders. The collapse of UK car manufacturer MG Rover in April 2005 prompted workers, on the Sunday following the announcement that the company would close, to travel in a convoy of over 300 vehicles to the gates of the Birmingham factory. Flowers were laid and a banner with the epitaph ‘Rest in Peace MG’ was hung across the gates. The closure of another UK factory owned by car manufacturer Jaguar in the company’s birthplace and home town of Coventry precipitated similar memorializing practices amongst workers and members of the wider community (Bell, forthcoming). A further example relates to the economic downturn in 2008 which prompted workers in the City of London to create a memorial with flowers and cards outside the Royal Exchange, with the epitaph ‘RIP, in loving memory of the boom economy’ (although there was more than a hint of irony in this gesture). These practices may be interpreted in relation to broader shifts concerning bereavement practices in Western societies that have resulted in the placing of flowers at the side of road traffic accidents or video technologies that allow the dead to leave messages to the living (Howarth, 2007). However, they also indicate that differences between bereavement patterns in Western cultures and countries like Japan may have been overstated, survivors in both contexts seeking to maintain long-term sentimental attachments to the deceased.

The empirical limitations we have noted here, and the insights gained from other cultures and data collection methods, help to explain the ongoing dominance of stage theories in analyses of organizational death and loss. We suggest that researchers need to take greater account of intercultural and intracultural differences in the experience of organizational death, loss and grief. To conclude this article we

summarise the opportunities that continuing bonds theory presents to management researchers through introducing alternative ways of understanding the grieving process.

Implications for Research and Practice

This article has shown that psychological stage models of loss and grief remain dominant in studies of organizational death, despite significant empirical and theoretical challenges that have arisen in their discipline of origin. We have argued that stage models are only limitedly able to account for the complexity and diversity associated with organizational loss. We have therefore called for exploration of the continuing bonds perspective which has the potential to strengthen the field through treating organizational death as a cultural phenomenon that is fundamental to the construction of work-related meaning. In conclusion, we suggest an emerging set of research issues that scholars in this field might begin to address.

First, future research might examine how the presence of dead organizations is maintained following fundamental change events such as acquisitions and mergers or business failures. This would include consideration of the impact of organizational losses through site closure, particularly if employees have a strong attachment to organizational location and place (Milligan, 2003). Studies might also focus on the experience of organizational loss in temporary organizations (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995), where the knowledge that organizational death through termination will occur constitutes an explicit feature of the organization's formation. It would also enable analysis of the role of expectations in informing different responses to organizational death and the different criteria that may be adopted by managers, employees and other

stakeholders to evaluate whether or not an organizational death has occurred. There is also a need for further study of the processes whereby the criteria that are used to evaluate organizational death are constructed and the role of experts in their establishment. Glaser and Strauss's (1968) highly influential study of process through which the individual dying process unfolds could be used to conceptualize organizational death as a trajectory, punctuated by events or critical junctures that determine its precise nature and length. This would encourage conceptualization of organizational death as a socially constructed process that involves the formation of expectations which determine how specific organizational groups respond to these events. Although managers possess legitimate power through which they seek to define the organization's condition, other organization members may form their own expectations by reading cues through which they map out the status passage of the dying organization.

This would also encourage exploration of how memories of deceased organizations are integrated into the ongoing lives of survivors through inviting understanding of grief as an aspect of collective identity construction and organizational memory formation that can extend well beyond the functioning life of the organization. A continuing bonds perspective would encourage re-evaluation of the role of history in helping organization members to understand the present and anticipate the future (Gioia, Corley & Fabbri, 2002) and the role of organizational death in constructing meaning in the present. For, as Walter (1999) notes, the way in which the dead are integrated into the present affects how members of societies and organizations see their history. Scholars might also consider the function of physical remains, including heritage sites, monuments or disused buildings, in providing a

focus for organizational grief and mourning. These identity construction processes are particularly important in cases of sudden, premature or violent organizational death where its inevitability is more likely to be contested (Erkama, 2010).

Second, scholarship on organizational death, loss and grief could be strengthened through clearer explication of the levels of analysis implied by the use of these terms. Existing studies suggest that organizational death is a collective-level phenomenon, involving the loss of a fundamental structure of meaning. However, analyses of organizational grief have focused on how organization members respond to these events, using psychological theory to explore the cognitive and emotional processes associated with individual bereavement. Organizational grief is thereby portrayed as an individual-level phenomenon. Drawing on Olick (1999), we suggest there is a need for clearer differentiation between *collected* organizational grief, which focuses on the aggregated individual bereavement experiences of organization members in response to organizational death, and *collective* organizational grief, which assumes that organizational bereavement can be understood intersubjectively, as a shared experience. A collected organizational grief perspective is inherently individualistic; it assumes that only individuals can experience bereavement, whether alone or in groups, whereas a collective organizational grief approach emphasizes the symbols, language, events, social and cultural experiences of bereavement. Distinction between individualist and collectivist understandings of organizational loss and grief is important because different methodological and analytical strategies are required to enable their exploration. Thus far, organizational analyses have been dominated by the collected organizational loss and grief approach, which tends to reify the individual. However, both approaches have limitations; a collective

organizational grief approach inclines towards reifying the organization. It is therefore important that psychological-cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives on organizational loss and grief develop in a complementary, rather than a contradictory direction through further theoretical and empirical investigation.

Third, the continuing bonds perspective potentially legitimates a wide variety of organizational mourning experiences. Studies could seek to represent marginalised and under-represented voices, including those who resist managerial invitations to let go and move on. Critical study would enable the life-world experiences of less powerful organisational members to be represented by accepting their feelings and perceptions of grief as legitimate and meaningful. Research might also be conducted into ‘disenfranchised grief’ (Doka, 2002) which occurs when people are socially prevented from publicly acknowledging or mourning the loss of their organization, intensifying their feelings of loss in the longer term. Rather than seeking to understand grief as a temporary affliction that can be alleviated and eradicated through managerial intervention oriented towards control and minimization, studies might focus on the potential for mourning rituals to act as a resource for resistance and collective action. Studies could explore how sustained grief which is translated from an individual to a collective level can be used as a resource for resistance, by enabling less powerful organizational members to give voice to experience.

Fourth, while this paper has primarily been concerned with the concept of organizational death, the perspective outlined in this article also has implications for understanding collective responses to the death of individuals in organizational

contexts. For example, scholars have recently begun to explore the phenomenon of organizational suicide, where people are understood to have taken their own lives in protest at situations involving intolerably oppressive or exploitative organizational practices. One recent case focussed on consumer electronics manufacturer, Foxconn, an electronic component manufacturer that employs more than 800,000 people around the world and supplies to global brands including Apple and Nokia. In May 2010 journalists began to report a string of employee suicides at one of the company's factories in Shenzhen, China. A related case focused on managerial responses to a series of employee suicides at telecommunications firm France Télécom in 2008 and 2009 (Seignour & Palpacuer, 2010). In both instances, interpretation of motives for the suicides by colleagues and families, union representatives and the global media, (often based on letters left by those who had committed suicide), focused on oppressive working conditions in the company. A third case which organizational scholars have recently focused on concerns a 260% increase in the incidence of suicide among farmers in India during the early years of the twenty-first century (Banerjee, 2008).

Official organizational responses to these tragedies focused on seeking psychological or medical, rather than social solutions, through introducing workplace counsellors or stress management programmes to help surviving employees (Seignour & Palpaceur, 2010), or collecting DNA from deceased farmers in an attempt to identify a genetic pattern to the suicides (Mohanty, 2005). As we have already argued in this article, these responses are driven by a therapeutic ethos which defines bereavement as an emotional problem that needs to be solved through psychological or medical intervention (Furedi, 2004). By introducing a therapeutic system of

meaning which focuses on the role of experts in addressing problems of individual mental health and discourages collective mourning, the moral meanings of these tragic deaths, which may be associated with issues of organizational and managerial responsibility, are less likely to be considered. This exaggeration of individual vulnerability denies the potential value of tragedy in creating common purpose or commitment to struggle. Rather than being interpreted as an act of despair or psychological weakness, a continuing bonds perspective invites such deaths to be understood as acts of resistance that challenge oppressive and exploitative organizational practices through implicating those in positions of power (Holst-Warhaft, 2000; Andriolo, 2006).

Finally, the importance of continuing bonds as a means of understanding the relationship between life and death arises from the significance of these issues in constructing work-related meaning. As countless philosophers have observed, death and its interpretation is an inevitable part of life, an essential feature of the human condition (Bauman, 1992). Our ability to consider it is therefore significant in determining the fundamental structures of meaning invested in life projects (Berger, 1969; Willmott, 2001). This involves confronting the inescapable nature of death as a fact of life and means that 'death can no longer be exclusively regarded as an event at a particular point in time' but must be accepted 'as a constituent part of one's life' (Sievers 1994, p.215). This has implications for organization and management studies because, as Sievers (1986) notes, the fragmentation and problem of meaning in modern work can only be understood relative to the separation of life from death and the consequent denial of the latter within contemporary work organizations. He suggests that it is only by coming to terms with the inescapable nature of death as a

universal parameter and a constituent part of life that we will be able to discard mechanistic, reductionist theories of motivation in favour of more meaningful understandings of work and life. If loss and grief are understood as aspects of experience that lie at the heart of what it means to be human, their importance within management studies must be understood as a fundamental aspect of meaning making, rather than a problem to be solved.

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