Investigating the pre-reflective, embodied dimension of Grief. A phenomenological perspective

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Introduction

Although much research has been dedicated to the investigation of grief and the psychological effects of bereavement, not much attention has so far been granted to a systematic exploration of the effects bereavement may have on the level of our pre-reflective experiential life.

By pre-reflective, we are referring to the dimension of our lived experiences that 1) are conscious 2) precedes reflective attention, 3) in an all-encompassing way structure how the world manifests to the person. Importantly, it should be emphasised that pre-reflective experiences are not unconscious, but rather unnoticed in the flow of experience.

That the pre-reflective dimensions of grief have evaded attention from grief researchers is perhaps not surprising when one considers the current lack of both theoretical and methodological resources that could guide and sustain such an endeavour. Traditionally, the task of theorising pre-reflective experiential structures has belonged to the discipline of phenomenology. However, with the exception of trends in the field of phenomenological psychopathology, the focus of phenomenology has not been directed at specific life events, such as our focus on grief and bereavement, but towards a mapping of more general structures of experience.

This lack of theoretical resources is then coupled with a methodological problem: whereas phenomenology is usually conducted from a first-person perspective, a systematic inquiry into the pre-reflective experiential structures of grief would call for
an engagement through the second person perspective. But how do we access this
dimension in a systematic way?

Despite these difficulties we set out to investigate this dimension of grief and
bereavement in the coming years. We are guided by our recently developed theoretical
framework of the historical constitution of the embodied self and a transposition of this
framework into a qualitative research methodology.

Following the now commonly accepted insight that profound grief resulting from
bereavement is not a life event that simply dissipates with time, but rather an event that
permanently alters the existential reality of the bereaved, we posit the following as a
research question: how does significant bereavement shape the experiential structures
of the bereaved on a pre-reflective level?

In the following we will start out by briefly sketching the theoretical framework that
guides our investigation. From here we will promote the idea that any investigation of
the pre-reflective level of experience must be guided by a strong theoretical focus.
Lastly, we will present 5 theses on grief that will guide our investigations.

**Theoretical framework**

Our investigations are based in our recently developed existential-phenomenological
framework which offers a way of understanding the ontogenetic process through which
we are concretely individualised on a pre-reflective embodied level [1, 2, 3].

More specifically, this framework posits *personal history* as the ontogenetic process
through which a person acquires a concrete experiential structure that designates her
specific mode of being-towards-the world. The result of this diachronic process is the
synchronic structure we term *historical selfhood*.

Importantly, in positing the concepts of personal history and historical selfhood
respectively, we are referring to how our personal mode of being is shaped on an
embodied, pre-reflective level through experiential sedimentations, rather than how we acquire a sense of self through the production of self-narratives. Historical selfhood, therefore, refers to the facticity that I am, as a result of my entire temporal exposure, and not the selective story I might have produced in the process of ordering my experiences according to plot structures.

In relation to grief following bereavement, we might therefore specify our research focus to stating, that we are interested in how experiences of bereavement may modify experiential structures on the level of pre-reflective consciousness. That is, how the experience of bereavement sediments and shape the existential reality of the person.

**Attaining the pre-reflective**

However, such a research agenda is not unproblematic, and faces us with the following challenge: *How does one access and investigate pre-reflective experiential structures specific to grief within a systematic research context?*

Traditionally, the discipline committed to the investigation of pre-reflective structures of consciousness, has been phenomenology, where the problem of attaining access to the pre-reflective is well-known and extensively debated. Martin Heidegger has perhaps most famously summed up the basis for this difficulty in his statement that while this level of experience in an important sense is what we *are*, it is ontologically the farthest away. In other words: what is closest, most intimate and familiar to us experientially, is also that which is most hidden and difficult to gain a reflective access to.

Whereas this methodological issue has been duly attended to in traditional phenomenology—where the point of departure is the first-person perspective of the phenomenologist—not many resources have so far been made available for making the transition into the second-person perspective required for the qualitative interview. Indeed, this transition does pose an intensification or a certain doubling of the problem: the challenge to the phenomenologist is no longer only that of accessing his own pre-reflective level of experience—an exercise in which he is trained—but that of accessing
the pre-reflective experiences of another person not trained or used to engaging in articulations of experiential structures.

Although the methodological issues at play here are many, the scope of this paper will not allow us to give any comprehensive treatment hereof. We will therefore focus our attention on one pertinent issue; namely that our ambition to describe the pre-reflective manifestations of profound grief requires a tight integration with existing phenomenological theory in both the structuring of the interview and the subsequent interpretation of the interview material.

That this is in fact the case, is an insight echoed across the various, however few, contemporary attempts to articulate an interview methodology for investigating the pre-reflective dimension of experience in the second-person. The reasons for this are not only that it is difficult to gain reflective distance to our most intimate experiential structures, but also that it can be extremely hard to stabilise attention to these structures once identified and that they only lend themselves to verbalisation through great effort[4]. We therefore suggest that the project of bringing the pre-reflective to articulation requires that the interviewer provides: 1) an extensive guiding of the interviewees attention throughout the interview that seeks to evoke experiential sediments that might otherwise evade attention and 2) offer a rich vocabulary which can facilitate a narrativisation and verbalisations of these experiences, making them eligible for subsequent analysis.

It is to this end, that we have chosen to structure our investigations through a tight integration with contemporary phenomenological research. Our investigations will be guided by established phenomenological insights on the structures of experience, framed within the context of our notion of historical selfhood, and use it as a heuristic focussing the interviewer’s attention and for probing deeper into the experiences.

Specifically, we envision these heuristics in the format of a set of theses that will guide our investigation. Although these are based on current phenomenological insights on the structure of pre-reflective experience, we believe that it is important that they are
articulated in a manner where they are at the same time content-empty (referring only to structures of experience) and that our claim to their relevance to the phenomenon of grief is eligible for falsification. This, we believe, will contribute to a dynamic for the interview process which may facilitate the teasing out of tacit and pre-reflective experiences while still remaining adequately sensitive to actual lived experiences of the interviewees.

**Five theses on how profound grief shapes pre-reflective structures of experience**

**Thesis 1: There is an affective depth to profound grief following bereavement**

Throughout personal history we gradually acquire an ontogenetically specific affective register which is the result of the person’s particular experiential sedimentations. By an affective register we are not only referring to the fact that certain emotions become dominant in the person’s existential constitution, but also more broadly to the very affective reality that determines how the world appear to me and how I resonate with it.

It is our contention that profound grief following bereavement not only manifest affectively through an altered emotivity (prevalence of emotions of longing, despair, anger etc.) but also that the affective level responsible for our very contact and mode of resonating with the world gets altered. This fundamental level of affectivity is currently discussed in the phenomenological literature under diverse heading such as “befindlichkeit”; “existential feelings”; “primordial affectivity”; “oceanic feelings” etc.

In his mourning diaries, Roland Barthes pays testimony to this claim of an affective depth in grief when he insists on a distinction between what he calls the emotivity and the suffering of grief. Whereas the emotivity of grief is something that passes with time and manifests in ‘jerks and surges’, suffering is a constant state not in the same way susceptible to the corrosion of time.
Although such a fundamental affective level of grief is often indicated in personal accounts of grief, its affective geography has not yet been mapped nor explored systematically. This we set out to do.

**Thesis 2: The continued bond with the deceased is dependent on the structure of intercorporeity, and hence fundamentally embodied.**

Although our relations to significant others may be carried and upheld by a range of shared narratives and rituals, profound relations are also rooted in a shared intercorporeity. Intercorporeity—a concept first introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty—designates the phenomenological insight that as embodied we are never isolated beings, but fundamentally intertwined with other bodies. What we feel and experience is inextricably interwoven with what others feel and experience through bodily resonance.

Throughout personal history, this bodily resonance sediments to a particular bodily integration of intimate others in our own most bodily being. The embodied integration, we submit, is the fundamental way through which the grieving person experiences the ambivalent presence and absence of the bereaved other. In ‘*A grief observed*’ C.E. Lewis illustrates this ambiguity when he states:

‘*There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can’t avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H’s lover. Now it’s like an empty house*.’

Similarly, in ‘*falling out of time*’ David Grossman tells us:

‘*I am torn from myself, there I am no longer alone, no longer alone, ever since. And I am not just one there, and never will be just one*’ (24-25)

This phenomenon of a preservation of the deceased on an inter-corporeal level has not yet been exposed to a systematic investigation, and it is our contention that a thorough
mapping of the varieties and forms of inter-corporal integration following bereavement might contribute to our understanding of contemporary ideas such as the notion of continuing bonds, but also provide insight into such discussions as the emergence of prolonged grief as a diagnostic entity.

**Thesis 3: Grief is incorporated and becomes part of a person’s bodily expressivity**

The term incorporation has been coined by Thomas Fuchs (2012), to make the embodied aspect of enculturation explicit. Incorporation designates the process through which we in-corporate sociocultural norms, expectations, resources, and attitudes into bodily habits. Hence, incorporation may be broadly understood as the civilisation of our bodies, reflecting both our particular society and our particular position within it (with regards to our gender, age, class, profession etc.). It is our contention that grief is inscribed into our bodily expressivity, in ways that are both ontogenetically specific, and guided by cultural mediation. Firstly, we hypothesise that the living agony of grief may sediment to a personal embodied mode of expression through facial expressions and particular bodily postures of the bereaved etc. In Aidt’s case, she testifies to this, when pointing to how her loss shaped her bodily comportment to a state of heaviness: “When I think about you, with grief, when I remember what happened to you, everything sinks in my body - it is a sense of heaviness, that all cells in the body are forced downwards. To the ground. That sensation does not seem to change with time” (Aidt 66). Secondly, we suspect that this expressive level of bodily comportment is furthermore highly influenced by the particular cultural repertoire available to the person. It seems, for instance, reasonable to expect that the available modes of expressivity are quite different in the Middle East and in Scandinavia respectively, and that this will shape the particular expressions of the individual.

**Thesis 4: The deceased is extended into the personal habitat of the grieving person**

As has often been pointed out in the literature bereavement entails a fundamental ambiguity between presence and absence and between present and past. This ambiguity
which also entails the simultaneous painful acknowledgment of the loss along with its denial is clear in the altered way of being-in-the world of things and places for the bereaved. Holding on to, touching, and seeing items which belonged to the deceased, is a way of also holding on to the existence of that person, as those items are connecting the bereaved with the deceased because the belongings still bear direct marks of the person now no longer alive. Danish poet, Naja Aidt (2017) who brutally lost her adult son writes (108):

I sleep with your duvet.
I sleep with your fine light duvet.
I can still smell your skin, your sleep.
I tell myself: you are in your duvet.
I say: You are also in your duvet.
I say: you are. I believe, and I believe not in what I say.

The perplexed existence of the bereaved is sustained through, in this case, her surrounding and shrouding herself in the duvet, by which she is still retains him – smells him even, and at the same time she is reminded that she has in fact lost him. Hence, the belongings of the deceased can bring both comfort and agony to the bereaved; so, that some feel inclined to keep everything in place, as if keeping spaces ready for the return of the deceased, or keeping everything as if the deceased was still alive, whilst others avoid particular places, gets rid of or hides away all possessions and reminders of the deceased.

**Thesis 5: Grief acutely and permanently affects personal pre-reflective sense-making**

The process of personal sense-making, through which something reveals itself as something denotes the very structure of personal intentionality [2]. This process develops what we term a hermeneutic repertoire which is a generalized and embodied tendency to perceive in a certain way. Grief can profoundly affect the experiential horizon of the bereaved, and sediments to a generalized tendency to anticipate in a manner reflecting the experience of loss. As C.S. Lewis, upon losing his wife, wrote: it
is living itself which is different. “Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything” (5) and further “So many roads lead thought to H.” (23). In the acute state of raw grief, everything reminds the bereaved of the deceased and everything leads to thoughts of him/her. Naja Marie Aidt also testifies to this experience when she explains how: “Apricot jam becomes orange jam (his favorite) and the jam becomes a slimy track dragging everything with it. Sweet memories of Carl become bitter and unbearable because they lead towards his death” (Aidt 67). We suspect that persons who have suffered profound bereavement more permanently, although less intensely, may exhibit a tendency towards a fearful mode of sense-making: A phone ringing late at night, or a relative showing up without warning, (can immediately alarm the bereaved: as it could look like bad news), in ways demonstrating that the person who lived the loss of a loved one remains attuned to further losses, and retains an inclination towards a mode of interpretation that centers towards the catastrophic.
References


