Chapter 56

Faces of Grief:
Cross–Cultural Bereavement and Support in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Death, bereavement, and grief are natural processes that are experienced by every individual who is born into this world. The level of trauma experienced from such loss can be mitigated by internal factors and the external environment faced by the individual. Spiritual belief systems and culture play a critical role in the experience of bereavement. This qualitative study applies the phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of bereavement of 15 Malaysians from five different religious groups, namely Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Taoism. Rituals and belief systems impact an individual's experience with bereavement. The likelihood of individuals to seek emotional and psychological support depends greatly on individual belief systems, family support, support facilities set up by religious groups, and the perceived availability of professional services.

INTRODUCTION

While 'Death' is a universal experience, the process and philosophical construct of death varies between cultures and religions. As Victor Frankl in his book 'Man's Search for Meaning' (pg. 51, 1984) said "When we are no longer able to change a situation… we are challenged to change ourselves." Death of a loved one or a family member is an ultimate example of a situation where we are unable to change. The event of death in a family is a universal experience that leads to changes in family roles and in an individual's life. Cultural norms and traditions have been developed by all groups to support and come together in the times of grief, examples of such norms are Wakes where friends and family come together to share memories of their loved ones, *Cheng Beng* festival by the Chinese to honor the graves of their ancestors, daily prayers from 10 to 35 days by the Hindus where family is supposed to take turns bring-

ing food to ease the financial burdens of the family in mourning. Internal and external factors which are possibly influenced by upbringing and culture have a mitigating effect on the trauma experienced upon the death of a loved one. Rituals to face grief and death is different in every culture and society worldwide, but according to Weeks (2004) the common factor of all these rituals is that they "enable us to remain connected with the past, the future and with each other. They also serve to provide us with comfort and security." (pg. 115)

Malaysia, with its rich multi-cultural and multi-religious heritage, allows for unique insights into the lived experience of individuals who may have differing religious backgrounds. However, it does share a common nationality, and a broadly common Asian upbringing.

The qualitative methodology is an appropriate means of studying the matter of multicultural approaches to grief because it aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of the approach as proposed by Cresswell (2013). The qualitative methodology is ontological, allowing for the study of the multi-dimensional reality of the nature, its properties and interrelated relationships of human experience. It is also epistemological, axiological and rhetorical. This allows for the study of knowledge and the justification of meanings, how experiences are value and made sense of in the daily experiences of the individuals. The approach allows the researcher to study grief from both an individual and societal standpoint.

A phenomenological qualitative research design was employed for purposes of conducting this study to provide insight into the essence of the lived experience of those whom are undergoing a particular phenomenon. The phenomenological approach allows for the identification of differences and commonalities in individuals' experiences of complex social phenomena (Barnard, McCosker & Garber, 1999). At the same time, generalizing these ontological narrations of subjective understanding to encompass broader social and cultural discourses. The approach provides insights into the objective as well as the subjective experiences as reported by individuals (*Ibid.*). Hence, ensuring that the discourse on the personal experience of bereavement provided by respondents was descriptive as well as reflective in nature. It also provided for rich and thick data that is relatively free of the researchers' personal framework (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992).

The subjective experiences of individuals in the phenomenological approach according to German philosopher Husserl looks at the subjective experiences of the moments that matter, moments that give meaning to an individual's experience. As quoted in Bailey (2013) "To live, Husserl says, is to experience (*leben ist erleben*)" (p. 39). Grief as experience by an individual is very much a personal experience and through the phenomenological approach the moments that creates meaning for individuals are captured and applied.

Therefore, in the context of this study, the phenomenological approach has allowed for an in-depth examination of how Malaysians responded to the universal phenomenon of grief and bereavement within their unique cultural and religious context.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study applies the phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of bereavement of fifteen Malaysians from five different religious groups; namely, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism. All respondents had completed the first year anniversary of the death of their loved ones and were English speakers. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from individuals.

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