Religion’s Positive Relationship with the Bereavement Process

As a Modern Orthodox Jew I have been acculturated into a society which has many laws regarding mourning and bereavement for both the relatives of the deceased and the community at large. It has often made me wonder if all religions have such intrinsic laws regarding bereavement. Furthermore, I have frequently heard the claim that Judaism’s laws regarding bereavement are very similar to processes espoused by psychologists. I wanted to see if this is an accurate view of Judaism and whether other religions have similar approaches to bereavement. Finally, as a Psychology major and Religion minor the interplay between religion and psychology is of special interest to me. The many aspects of bereavement, the beliefs and the activities associated with this topic, felt like the ideal subject with which to address the interplay between religion and psychology.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) bereavement is a universal response to death. However, while grief may be universal, bereavement is culturally and religiously defined. The bereavement process differs among various religious groups. However, some practices of bereavement are found in many religions because the process addresses a universal feeling of grief. These procedures which are found in many religions may be what helps create the positive relationship that has been found between religion and the bereavement process.
The distinction created between bereavement, which is culturally bound, and grief, which is a universal feeling, begs for a definition of the two. The DSM-IV-TR defines bereavement as the reaction to the loss of a loved one. The symptoms of the bereaved are often similar to those of a person with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). However, the bereaved individual is not believed to have MDD unless the symptoms continue after two months post-death. Some symptoms are considered pathological from the first day after the death of a loved one, such as feeling that the bereaved would be better off dead or a prolonged lack of functional capacities (DSM-IV-TR, V62.82).

Stroebe, Hansson and Stroebe found that grief-like responses to death appear in many societies and cultures (82-83). This leads to the belief that grief is universal. However, grief is experienced in many different ways and the rituals and practices of how to respond to these feelings of grief are culturally bound and vary. These rituals and practices form the bereavement process. A positive outcome in the bereavement process, therefore, is synonymous with non-pathological grieving. Although, it should be noted, that what is considered pathological and what is considered the norm differs based on culture and religion.

Mantala-Bozos, in *The Role of Religion and Culture on Bereavement*, proposes positive predictors of the bereavement process (12). These predictors are a strong social support system, the ability to grieve openly, a time-limited framework for grieving, and, according to some, the development of a continued relationship with the deceased. The positive effect of a strong social support system is addressed by Worden who found that social isolation during a period of bereavement leads to anger, which in turn makes grieving even more difficult (132-133). The ability to grieve openly also helps the process of bereavement because it acknowledges grief as a natural response to death, which should, therefore, not be suppressed (Practice Guideline). There
is a widespread belief in the world of psychology that if an individual does not openly grieve after the death of a loved one the individual will experience grief later on in life. While some studies have found this to not be the case, the general consensus is that grief is important and will occur at some point in the life of the bereaved (Bonano, 802).

The third predictor of an effective bereavement is the time-limited framework. The time-limited framework relies on a model created by Freud which assumes that there is a correct path and process for grieving (Mantala-Bozos, 1); with this correct path in place the bereaved is believed to be on a good course towards recovering from bereavement. Finally, the fourth predictor is the continued relationship with the deceased. This relationship likely leads to a better outcome in the bereavement process because cutting off all ties with the deceased may lead to anxiety and stress.

The correlation between religion and bereavement can be seen in different situations. For example, older people have been shown to judge themselves as highly religious. The elderly are also more likely to be faced with experiences which lead to bereavement. Similarly, people in times of crisis or who are under stress or anxiety are more likely to show higher religious commitment (Wuthnow, 409). Both of these examples portray people turning to religion during a time of need in order to find comfort. In this way, the examples show that religion is likely to have an effect on the coping methods one uses during the bereavement process; they show a relationship between bereavement, coping, and religion. However, they do not explain how this relationship exists, what mediates the relationship, and if it merely correlation, or if it is also a causal relationship.

The relationship between bereavement and religion is not only observed, but has also been systematically studied and found to be a positive relationship. The findings show that
spiritual strength is a predictor of bereavement outcome. Spiritual strength, in this study, includes practices, beliefs, and the effects that the religion has on the culture of the person. The effects of strong and weak belief differ only for the first nine months. However, by fourteen months all of those who have spiritual belief fair the same in terms of bereavement outcome. People with no spiritual strength, on the other hand, have negative outcomes in the bereavement process even after fourteen months (Walsh, 4-5).

The positive effect that religion is seen to have on bereavement may be due to the fact that many religions include most of the aspects that Mantala-Bozos found to have a positive influence on the bereavement process. This would explain the importance of religion’s effect on bereavement in terms of how religion is practiced, the beliefs included in the religion and the cultural and communal aspects. The practices of religion connect to the ability to grieve publicly. The beliefs of a religion are related to the belief in an afterlife. It should also be noted that a belief in an afterlife would be seemingly impossible without religious convictions. Finally, religion’s cultural aspect can also be seen to be positively related to bereavement in terms of the strong social support system. Much of American public’s social activities are related to religious groups and institutions (Wuthnow, 417). This shows that the social and community aspect are central to religion. For the sake of this discussion, therefore, religion will be defined as a cultural, active and emotional construct.

Even in understanding those religions which include the aspects which Mantala-Bozos found help the bereavement process, it is interesting to examine how they all differ in their approaches towards bereavement and grief. These differences come from what is prescribed, what is merely suggested, how one understands death and what this means in terms of how the bereaved should act. The general understanding that religion is positively related to bereavement
and that there are four main processes that help bereavement does not explain how different religions relate to the bereavement process. Each religious group, and even different sects within a religion, needs to be addressed individually to show the varying trends within even those groups which are in line with Mantala-Bozos.

Clements et al. describe the Latino Catholic’s process of bereavement (20-21). The process includes many aspects which have been deemed positively associated with a good outcome of bereavement. For example, crying and grieving is not proscribed, but it is seen as healthy and appropriate. Furthermore, family and friends come to give support to the bereaved, giving the person a strong support system from those around him, especially from his nuclear family. Finally, Catholics believe in a continued relationship between the living and the dead. While these three aspects fit well into the scheme that Mantala-Bozos proposes for healthy bereavement, there is no set time period which is seen as appropriate for bereavement. In fact, periods of months or years are seen as appropriate for older men to grieve, contrary to the DSM-IV-TR’s prescribed six month bereavement process.

Catholic Latinos represent only one group among the many sects of Christianity. All of these sects, although unified in many ways, have differing bereavement practices. Orthodox Christianity, as described by Mantala-Bozos, includes many adaptive aspects of mourning in their practices of bereavement. Firstly, Orthodox Christians understand that crying is a necessity, as long as the crying is for the right reasons. One cannot cry for the death of a person, but can cry for the physical separation. The allowance for public grief is essential to positive development of the bereavement processes. The distinction created regarding why one is crying stems from their belief in a specific type of afterlife; death is not viewed as final, but a temporary
separation. Therefore, one is not to mourn for the deceased because it is as if the person is stating that he does not believe in the afterlife.

Orthodox Christianity encourages a continued relationship with the deceased (7-8). The bereaved is meant to find comfort in a continued relationship based on communications with the dead through prayer (10-11). Furthermore, the bereaved has a hope of meeting the deceased in the next life, which helps ease the pain of separation and helps explain the restrictions of crying and grieving only for certain reasons. The connection with the deceased is fulfilled systematically through memorial services on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after death and the third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth months after the death. After a year passes a service is commemorated yearly (12). Through these memorial services the continued connection with the deceased is not only emphasized and prescribed, but time-limits are placed on the bereavement process as well. Finally, these services give an opportunity for the community to partake in giving offerings to the dead and mourning with the bereaved (11). Through their understanding of death and the rituals that surround this understanding, Orthodox Christians include all aspects of bereavement which Mantala-Bozos deems essential. Importantly, the bereaved in Orthodox Christianity does not need to practice any of the rites that he or she does not want to do (12).

Although Islam views death, grieving, and bereavement differently than Latino Catholicism, it also incorporates many of the aspects which have been shown to improve the process of bereavement. In Islam, death is seen as a journey through the spiritual world (Hedayat, 1284). The deceased is believed to be returning to God (Quran, 2:156). So, although a relationship with the deceased is not encouraged or addressed, the religious explanation of death helps the bereaved understand that he is not losing a loved one for naught. The religious meaning given to death and its implications for the belief in an afterlife helps buffer the effects
of despair that can come from the death of a loved one. Crying is believed to show that a person is a loving individual who shows kindness. This ability to grieve openly does not only help the bereaved, as stated above, but in Islam it also signals the community to take care of the bereaved (Hedayat, 1287). Similar to Latino Catholicism, Islam does not have a certain time limit by which one must recover from his or her grief. However, bereavement is considered pathological if the bereaved cannot perform his or her daily tasks and routine activities after a short amount of time (1287).

Judaism has many laws pertaining to bereavement. The process of bereavement, according to Jewish law, includes time-bound stages; in each stage the laws become less and less restrictive, following the time-limited model of grief. The first stage, aninut, is a time period between the death and the burial. After the funeral there is a seven day period, shiva, in which the mourner is made to contemplate the loss and be completely under the care of the religious community. For thirty days after the funeral the bereaved continues to grieve, but he returns to work and a daily life routine. For a full year the mourner recites a daily life-affirmation prayer. Finally, every year on the date of the death the mourner lights a candle and recites the life-affirming prayer (Clements et al. 23-24). The different stages reflect the belief that grief exists and should be addressed; however, it also indicates that a person should also be able to control his feelings of grief after a certain amount of time and this control should become stronger over time (Wolowelsky, 479). These periods do not only have the important aspect of a time-limited bereavement, but the laws which are included in them also have positive implications for the bereavement process.

Many of the laws in the varying stages of grief lead to an enforcement of the bereaved being surrounded by his or her religious community. For example, the community is required to
provide food and comfort for the mourner for at least a week (Clements, 24). The importance of
the communal aspect is emphasized to the extent that if there is no immediate family member of
the deceased, ten people, the definition of a community in Judaism, need to sit and mourn for the
dead for a week (Wolowelsky, 472-473). Despite the many laws of how one must act during
the time set aside for bereavement, there is no law which states that one must grieve. Instead, a
person is given activities to do which usually lead to openly grieving (Clements, 24). The
activities are also meant to channel the grief, that they are assumed to have, through prescribed
activities (Wolowelsky, 471-472; 478).

Similar to the beliefs of Catholic Latinos, Jews believe that death is the returning of the
soul to God; man was created from dust and God and is returned to the same places (Clements,
23). Additionally, Judaism has a belief in an afterlife. The bereaved is not encouraged to
continue a relationship with the deceased and does not have a direct connection to the deceased.
However, the life-affirming prayer he is to say every day for a year is believed to help the soul
gain an elevated place in the afterlife (Kissen, 33). In this way the deceased and the bereaved
have a continued relationship. Additionally, this prayer may only be said in a quorum of at least
ten men; for a full year the community acts as part of the bereavement process. Judaism, through
its beliefs and laws addresses the universal reaction of grief through laws pertaining to a
communal support system, the ability, although not necessity, to grieve openly, a framework of
how and when to grieve, and, finally, a belief in an afterlife which calls for a continued
connection between the deceased and bereaved, although not a continued relationship.

While some sects of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism seem to treat bereavement in
manners which are similar to the processes espoused by Mantala-Bozos, other religious groups
do not include these aspects. The Navajo tribe of Native Americans, for example, has a belief in
a type of afterlife. However, unlike in the other religions that have been discussed, this belief in
the afterlife does not lead to the ability to have a continued connection with the deceased in some
way. Instead, the belief in the afterlife leads the Navajo to believe that they cannot continue to
speak or even think about the deceased, for this would keep the deceased’s spirit from being able
to continue his or her journey to the next world. This belief does not only lead the Navajo to not
have the adaptive continued relationship with the deceased, but it also leads the Navajo to not
have other adaptive processes which Mantala-Bozos states help with bereavement. Without the
ability to discuss or think about the deceased, the bereaved has no ability to express grief.
Furthermore, without the ability to grieve the bereaved is left with no ability to have a support
system (Clements, 23).

Mormons, like the Navajo, do not have many of the adaptive processes for a successful
bereavement process. Mormons believe that death is a temporary separation. Although the
Latino Catholics have a similar belief, for Mormons this belief leads them to prohibit any type of
mourning or bereavement (Eisenbruch, 295). The norm is one in which the bereaved person is
supposed to continue on with life as if nothing happened. Without the ability to mourn, the
bereaved is led to feel as if he or she has no social support helping them. Eisenbruch states that
the lack of a social network leaves the bereaved in an uncomfortable situation if he or she feels
the need to grieve (296). This shows that although a belief in some kind of afterlife or continuity
of life for the deceased is often adaptive, there are times where it can lead to unfavorable
behaviors.

Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson found that Mormonism does not have a positive correlation
with a good outcome in the bereavement process. They understood this to mean that religion, in
general, does not have a positive relationship with bereavement (250). However, with the
understanding that Mormonism is lacking essential properties needed for a healthy bereavement process, these findings can be understood without expanding them to make claims about other religions.

Navajo Native Americans and Mormons have been found to have a negative relationship or no relationship with the process of bereavement (Stroebe, 250; Eisenbruch, 296). Their lack of conformity to the processes which have been found to help the bereavement process helps explain the lack of relationship found between the religious practices of Navajo Indians and Mormons and their bereavement outcomes. These findings also support the notion that grief is universal, for if there was no grief in these religions, the negative relationship between the religion and bereavement would not lead to seemingly pathological attitudes and stress. The Navajo and Mormons, therefore, show that grief is universal while the bereavement process is a culturally defined process made to react to this grief. However, it should be noted that the understanding of what is a good process of bereavement and what is not is itself a culturally bound understanding. Therefore, while repression of feelings seem pathological to the Western view, it is unclear if the Navajo Indians would agree with this assessment.

Despite the non-linear relationship found between the bereavement process and the religion of the Navajo and Mormons, the general finding that religious beliefs leads to a positive relationship beg for a delineation of additional factors in religion which may lead to a healthy bereavement process. In general, religion’s ability to provide meaning for death helps make the bereavement process endurable (Wuthnow, 410-411). For example, a conception or belief in God and an explanation of evil have been shown to have a positive influence on the bereavement process and cannot be attained without religious beliefs (412-415). A belief about God leads to a sense of comfort and divine guidance during a time of uncertainty. This is especially true if the
believer is sure of God’s existence and if he or she believes that God is intimately related to what happens in this world (410). With this belief the bereaved can find meaning in the death of the loved one and purpose in the bereavement actions he or she is performing. Many religious groups explain evil occurrences as stemming from actions that the person did himself or other life events. The tendency of mourners is to blame God. By giving a different explanation for where evil comes from the religion shifts blame away from God and onto some objective thing (413). The person can then express anger towards that thing and continue to turn to a belief in a God who is still thought to be merciful.

In these ways both a belief in God and an explanation of evil, as given by religion, help explain additional aspects of religion which help the bereaved. These aspects give the person a belief that their actions and the events that have occurred to them have a purpose. These aspects found in religion along with the four enumerated above, given by Mantala-Bozos, are likely the reason for the positive relationship between religion and bereavement.

This helps explain why all religions, whether or not they follow practices that are seen as adaptive by the Western world, help with the bereavement process. Those religions that do include the processes suggested by Mantala-Bozos have a more positive relationship with the bereavement process, as evidenced by the findings of Mormons and Navajo Native Americans’ poor relationship. While both invariably have the positive aspects of religion in general, their bereavement processes are not seen as adaptive. This can be explained due to the fact that they do not include the additional positive aspects of bereavement. Although, it should be again noted that the judgment of how adaptive a process is, is culturally made.

While religious beliefs do help the general process of bereavement, it cannot be ignored that religious beliefs also lead to some problems. If one is unable to participate in some practices
it can lead to guilt (Wuthnow, 413). Furthermore, if one’s religion does not allow one to grieve it can lead to some feelings of isolation, as mentioned by Eisenbruch (296). A lack of strong religious belief can also lead to the feeling that the prescriptions of what one must do during times of bereavement might lead to a feeling of suffocation (Wolowelsky, 478). Religion can also lead to negative effects if the death of a loved one cannot be reconciled with the beliefs in God, or if beliefs are challenged in other ways during the bereavement process. These threats to religious beliefs lead to experiences of anxiety and feelings of disorganization (Stroebe, 118).

Rubin and Nassar address some of these issues of how religion can have a negative influence on the bereavement process in some ways through a description of a Muslim family whose bereavement process for their son became pathological. They were not understood by their doctors and were not able to fulfill some of their rituals (343). These processes which went unfulfilled led to guilt and a lack of closure with the deceased. Therefore, although Islam’s practices help the bereavement process, as seen above, if one is unable to perform some proscribed activities or feels that his or her beliefs are misunderstood it can lead to a pathological process of bereavement. Rubin and Nassar also note that the psychologists and doctors working with this family did not understand their religious beliefs and needs, which may have led to the pathological effect that the religion had on the bereavement process (345-346).

This case study and the other examples addressed show how religion can create hardships in the bereavement process. It seems that a better outcome is more likely when religion recommends certain practices instead of requiring them, or if a religion adapts to an environment (Mantala-Bozos, 12). However, this flexibility cannot be forced too far, for part of religion’s positive effect is its structure which leads to the adaptive qualities and behaviors (Wuthnow, 415).
This study has shown that the bereavement process is not universal. While grief may be a common response to the death of a loved one, there are many ways in which grieving is practiced. An understanding of both religious views of bereavement and psychological understandings can help a grieving individual attain the best outcome from his or her bereavement process. These differing approaches to the bereavement processes show that there is no universal understanding of how the process should occur. Therefore, the DSM-IV-TR should be cautious in how it addresses the bereavement process and at what point it believes that the symptoms which come with bereavement lead to a diagnosis of MDD.

Eisenbruch addresses this issue of the universalism of grief (283-287). He explains that bereavement is likely to be both a biological reaction and a process which has cultural emphasis. He claims that just because public expression of grief is different it does not mean that there is no universal grieving process (287). As has been seen there are differences in stages of grief, in the duration of private and public bereavement, and in the practices of varying religions. This may lead to an understanding of a universal reaction of grief with a cultural basis on the practices of bereavement (286-287). Even if this is the case, however, the different practices of religions have been shown to have a positive effect on the bereavement process. Therefore, they should not be taken lightly.

Religion’s relationship with bereavement greatly relates to the study of Cultural Psychology. As has been seen it brings into question the universal aspect of bereavement that the DSM-IV-TR espouses. The many different religions view death and the bereavement process in many different ways; while there may be some underlying aspects which can be found in many of religions, it is clear that not all religions contain these aspects and no two religions practice the underlying aspects in the same way. Furthermore, the similarity of religion and
culture leads to religions’ effects on bereavement to be of much interest to the study of Cultural Psychology (Geertz).
Works Cited


“Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Patients With Major Depressive Disorder, Third


