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General Psychological Implications of the Human Capacity for Grief

Svend Brinkmann [1]

Abstract Much theorizing in psychology and related disciplines begins with a given model of the mind that is then applied in research projects to study concrete phenomena. Sometimes psychological research can be theory-driven in quite an explicit way, approaching the logic of the hypothetico-deductive method. Others reject this and prefer to work inductively, and, in the extreme case of positivism, perhaps try to avoid theorizing altogether. In this article I shall suggest another way to think of the relationship between psychological theories and psychological phenomena. My suggestion is not simply to replace the hypothetico-deductive model with an inductive one, but to argue that the most direct route to theories of the human mind that grasp its complexity is to begin with the Kantian question of transcendental philosophy: X exists – how is X possible? In the context of this article, I apply this questioning to the phenomenon of grief: Grief exists – what general psychological theory of the mind do we need in order to account for its possibility? I attempt to extract three general psychological points from the existence of grief, viz. (1) the deep relationality of the self, (2) the limitations of evolutionary accounts, and (3) the normativity of psychological phenomena. I shall argue that these are general psychological lessons to be learned from grief, although they could also be arrived at by considering several other significant psychological phenomena.

Keywords Grief · Phenomenology · General psychology · Relational self · Evolution · Normativity

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Introduction

Much theorizing in psychology and related disciplines begins with a given model of the mind that is then applied in research projects to study concrete phenomena. A psycho-analyst, for example, will have a rather distinct understanding of the mind and conse-quently design her inquiries to reveal unconscious processes through dreams, jokes, or slips of the tongue. A behaviorist will likewise have a favored conception of the mind as a stimulus-response machine, which naturally directs the kinds of experiments that she will undertake. A cognitivist will often go to the laboratory to try and open the black box of alleged information processing between stimuli and responses. And the list could go on and include everything from evolutionary to narrative psychological theories. I find nothing wrong per se with this way of working, although the theoretical outlook is often at risk of coming to dictate what kinds of phenomena that become visible for the researcher. Still, it is arguably much better than proceeding like pure empiricists or positivists without any ambition to theorize at all as an essential component of scientific work. Sometimes psychological research can be theory-driven in quite an explicit way, approaching the logic of the hypothetico-deductive method (a hypothesis is deduced from a general theory, which is then subjected to falsification by a test on observable data, ideally leading to adjustments of the original theory). But more often a theoretical outlook is lurking vaguely in the background of scientific inquiry, perhaps in the form of a basic vocabulary, and researchers are generally unwilling to give up their theoretical perspectives, even when confronted with seemingly contradictory observations. In that case, they typically choose to blame a faulty experimental set-up (in the spirit of keep the theory, discard the data). This was classically demonstrated by Thomas Kuhn in his work on paradigms and scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1970).

In this article I shall suggest another way to think of the relationship between theories of the mind and psychological phenomena. My suggestion is not to simply replace the hypothetico-deductive model with an inductive one. This was already suggested in one way by the positivists with their "verificationism" and distrust of theory (expressed clearly by Ayer 1936), and, in another way, by the "grounded theorists" in qualitative studies (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I believe that significant research can emerge from both deductive and inductive research designs, but I shall argue that the most direct route to valid theories of the human mind that may grasp its complexity is to begin with the Kantian question of transcendental philosophy: X exists – how is X possible? In psychology the approach would be: Psychological phenom-enon X exists – what must the mind be like (i.e., what theory of the mind would we need) in order to account for its possibility?

I hasten to add that I do not say this in order to advocate Immanuel Kant's general transcendental theory of the mind as such, with its numerous a priori forms and categories (Kant 1781). But I do think that Kant's transcendental question is generally helpful and should be posed more often: We do have experience – how is it possible? Kant's question is thus about the conditions of possibility for the existence of some phenomenon, and – needless to say – a valid answer to the transcendental question presupposes a very careful phenomenology of the given X in question. That is, it is vital that the X – the phenomenon – is adequately grasped and described in order for it to be foundational in the formulation of a more general theory of the mind that would render X possible. So the general thrust of this scientific strategy should be clear: To begin with the fully developed psychological

phenomena in their holistic forms, and, from an understanding of these phenomena, work toward a theoretical account of the mind that respects their essential features and account for their possibility. The ambition is thus to begin with the phenomena of higher psychological functions and construct a non-reductive theoretical account of these (Valsiner et al 2016).

The present paper springs more concretely from a research project that I recently initiated with a group of colleagues. Prompted by the emerging psychiatric diagnosis of "complicated grief" (Wakefield 2012), we decided to study the ongoing transformations in the ways that humans experience and enact grief today. We were immediately faced with difficult questions such as: What is grief? Is it a universal human phenomenon? What is its function? Why has it evolved in the course of natural history? How much cultural variation do we find concerning grief? And how much individual variation? Can it ever be legitimate to think of grief as a mental disorder? Obviously, I have no intention of answering all these difficult questions in the context of the present paper, but I mention them simply to illustrate how different answers to these questions follow quite logically from different pre-established theoretical ideas about the mind. If one begins with evolutionary psychological theories, one is led predictably in one direction (e.g. Archer 1999), and if one begins with cultural psychological and anthropological theories, one is led in another (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1993). In contrast, I shall here pose the Kantian question: Grief exists as a phenomenon – what general psychological theory of the mind do we need in order to account for its possibility? What must the human mind be like in order to make possible the kind of grief that actually exists in human lives?

The structure of the article will be as follows: First, I provide a phenomenological description of grief, something that will hopefully establish the essential characteristics of the X that we shall deal with. Next, I attempt to extract three general psychological points from the existence of grief, viz. (1) the deep relationality of the self, (2) the limitations of evolutionary accounts, and (3) the normativity of psychological phenomena. I shall argue that these are general psychological lessons to be learned from grief, although they could probably also be arrived at by considering several other significant psychological phenomena. Naturally, many other consequences could also be drawn in addition to the ones chosen here, but I believe that these three are some of the lessons with the highest degree of generality for psychologists and other human scientists. The steps taken in the present article will only be preliminary ones, and I have no ambition of closing the discussion about the characteristics of grief as a human emotion (or of the nature of the human mind!), but I simply wish to advocate that psychologists and other researchers of the mind study higher psychological functions with an outset in the Kantian question and the phenomenological description that it demands.

A Phenomenology of Grief

A standard definition of grief states that the term refers to "the emotions that accompany bereavement", whereas mourning is "the behavior that social groups expect following bereavement" (Walter 1999, p. xv). Already when giving such a simple definition, difficulties emerge, because not everyone will agree that it is possible to make a distinction between emotions (as "inner" psychological phenomena) and social

norms for expressing such emotions (through mourning). Wittgensteinian approaches to emotions in particular will typically question any absolute distinction between subjective feeling and outward expression (Gustafsson et al. 2009). In his masterpiece, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein imagines that someone says "For a second he felt deep grief" (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 174). It might make sense to say "For a second he felt violent pain", because such unpleasant sensations may come and go at a certain spot in a limb, for example, but grief is precisely *not* a sensation in the body, Wittgenstein wants to show us, but an emotion that can be what it is only in a specific context – temporal as well as situational or spatial; what Wittgenstein elsewhere calls "the whole hurly-burly" of life. Grief, it seems, is necessarily not only embodied, but also embedded in a given context (see Brice 2013, for a Wittgensteinian approach to embodied and embedded cognition). If Wittgenstein is right, then the felt emotion of grief is deeply entangled with the way it is expressed by the *body* in specific *situations*, although he would never deny that humans may also come to disguise their grief instead of expressing it, for example if they experience what has been called disenfranchised grief – grief that is unrecognized and unsupported by other members of society (Doka 2016).

A few scholars have in recent years attempted to describe the phenomenology of grief. Phenomenology in this sense represents an ambition to uncover the essential structure of experience from a first-person perspective – in this case of grief. In a recent article, Fuchs (2018), explores the "core structure to the experience of grief" (p. 45) in a phenomenological way, which, he finds, has both interpersonal, temporal, and bodily aspects. He describes grief as an emotion that comes after the initial shock and numbness after bereavement: "Often the bereaved person closes his eyes or throws his hands before his face in despair, as if to stop vision. This is accompanied by a general bodily exhaustion, passivity, and lack of drive which severely restrict one's initiative and scope of action. Finally, loss of appetite and sleep disturbances also resemble the symptoms of depression" (p. 46). Fuchs mentions depression because one of the goals of his phenomenological study is to arrive at a valid distinction between grief and depression. Fuchs invokes the popular metaphor of amputation to account for the phenomenology of grief; it is often described as losing a limb, a part of one's body. The key experiential features of grief are said to be bodily heaviness, passivity, constriction and withdrawal (p. 46), but not, it should be noted, the characteristic bodily signs of depression such as rigidity and loss of affective resonance. When a person loses someone close – perhaps a life-long partner – a separation of intercorporeality is involved: "The threads of mutual attachment and belonging are cut off, and the wound or pain that is now felt bears resemblance to an amputation of the 'dyadic body' that one has formed with the other" (p. 47). Fuchs also addresses the temporality of grief and emphasizes the typical felt standstill of time after bereavement: "the future is no longer experienced as an open horizon of possibilities and projects", as he puts it (p. 51).

Along similar phenomenological lines, Ratcliffe (2017) argues that a core feature of the phenomenology of grief lies in the fact that after bereavement one is "losing systems of possibility" (p. 4). After the loss of a loved one, the whole interpersonal system of relating to the other is lost, which otherwise operated as a backdrop to life and meaning, and this confirms a central point emphasized by Attig (2004), viz. that grieving is a process of "relearning the world" in the sense of constructing a new system of possibilities, even if this also involves continuing the bonds with the deceased. Following

Heidegger's existential phenomenology, Attig defines the self as "a web of caring connections" (p. 348), and we learn from the phenomenological analyses presented here that this web is deeply inscribed into the body of the bereaved as a system of possibilities for action and meaning in relation to significant other people.

I find that phenomenologists such as Fuchs and Ratcliffe have disclosed very significant features of grief, particularly related to its embodiment in general, separation of intercorporeality, changed experience of time, and first and foremost the loss of a system of possibilities. However, I would like to point out an omission in their accounts, which is perhaps so fundamental that it easily becomes overlooked, viz. that grief involves *the loss of another* in an ontological sense, so to say. In my view, Fuchs and Ratcliffe put too much emphasis on *the loss of possibilities* in a purely psychological sense, as if the other – the loved one that has died – only existed in the world for the sake of the bereaved. They operate phenomenologically in a representational way, but I believe that an adequate phenomenology of grief must begin with an understanding of loss in an ontological sense. In a very famous and sensitive grief memoir, C.S. Lewis has the same thought (not, of course, in response to Fuchs and Ratcliffe, but as a reaction to his own sorrow): After describing the phenomenology of grief – e.g. by likening it to the experience of anxiety (fluttering in the stomach, restlessness, yawning) – Lewis reflects critically on his own account: "For the first time I have looked back and read these notes. They appal me. From the way I've been talking anyone would think that H's death mattered chiefly for its effect on myself. Her point of view seems to have dropped out of sight" (Lewis 1961, p. 16). And later in his book, Lewis confirms that it is his wife (whom he refers to as H) – as an independent person – that he is grieving, not simply the way she represented something *for him*:

> All reality is iconoclastic. The earthly beloved, even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to; you want her with all her resistances, all her faults, all her unexpectedness. That is, in her foursquare and independent reality. And this, not any image or memory, is what we are to love still, after she is dead. (Lewis 1961, p. 56)

This idea is rather difficult to express in the phenomenological manner of Fuchs and Ratcliffe, given the fact that these authors build on Husserl with all the strengths of his phenomenology as a strict, descriptive science, but also with the weaknesses, especially related to the tendency to reduce the other to the same, as Emmanuel Lévinas famously argued in his critique of Husserl (Levinas 1969). The post-Husserlian phenomenology of Lévinas was meant to respect the *otherness of the other* as an essential aspect of our experience, and not make the other into something that has meaning only in relation to me. In Davis' book on Lévinas, he spells out the problem that he (Lévinas) saw in Husserl's phenomenology: "consciousness can never meet anything truly alien to itself because the external world is a product of its own activity" (Davis 1996, p. 19). And, positively about Lévinas' contribution, Davis writes that what is at stake in his discussions of intentionality, "is the ability of consciousness to encounter something other than itself. If meaning is entirely given by the subject rather than found in the world, then consciousness cannot experience, perceive or learn anything that it did not already contain" (p. 19). Lévinas was working towards a conception of subjectivity as "radically turned outwards, maintaining an openness to the non-self which is not

subsumed under the categories of representation or knowledge" (p. 20), and he would probably agree with C.S. Lewis that "all reality is iconoclastic"; the other is more than my image (icon, representation) of the other. We must therefore not reduce the other to my representation of him or her – and this includes the other in his or her absence after death. The reality of the other simply surpasses any image I may form of him or her (cf. iconoclasm). This, in a nutshell, is Lévinas' great contribution to phenomenology, and it is noteworthy that the subtitle to his grand work on *Totality and Infinity* is "an essay on exteriority". Husserlian phenomenology does not take the exteriority of the other sufficiently into account, or the otherness of the other.

Taking note of this, however, does not take anything away from the concrete phenomenological descriptions presented in the studies of Fuchs and Ratcliffe, as I believe these are both valid and precise, but it simply adds an important point about grief being directed at the death of the other – and not simply at my own prospects and plans after bereavement, however important these may also be. Grief is not just about the fact that *I lose someone*, but also about the more fundamental fact that *someone does no longer exist*. One may say that I do not grieve my loss, as if the death of the other were reducible to my response in bereavement. Rather, I grieve the fact that the other has perished. This also explains why we may grieve the loss of people we did not know personally and who did not exist for us as a "system of possibilities" (e.g. Lady Diana, Prince, David Bowie etc.). Of course, in principle, one can say that after the death of David Bowie, for example, there is a loss of intercorporeality, because one can no longer attend his concerts, but this is an extremely thin version of intercorporeality compared to that which may exist between lifelong partners or others with frequent embodied interaction. And yet, people may nonetheless experience quite profound grief when they learn that their idols have passed.

The human capacity for knowing that the other exists in her particular otherness – and not only in her meaning for me – is related to what Mammen has called the human "sense of the concrete" (Mammen and Mironenko 2015): The other that one loves is not simply a collection of qualitative characteristics that we may perceive with the senses (Mammen talks about "sense categories" in this context), but is also a person with *numerical identity* that we understand through what he calls "choice categories". And we grieve exactly when the numerical identity of the other has gone and only exists as traces of memory. In the same way, a person may feel sad if she loses a coin that her grandmother had given her from the year she was born. Even if she receives a new coin from the same year, with all the same qualitative characteristics that can be perceived with the senses (sense categorical cognition), she knows that it is not the same coin in a numerical sense, even if it may be molecule-by-molecule identical. It has had a different trajectory through space and time, just as humans have unique stories and relationships even if they share many qualitative characteristics with other humans. Perhaps the ability to understand this kind of numerical identity (though choice categories in Mammen's terms) is unique to humans and probably foundational for our capacity for grief (Brinkmann in press). With this we are already beginning to unfold some general psychological implications of grief, so let us move on to three of these.

The Deep Relationality of the Self

After having provided the contours of a phenomenology of grief – with a combination of Husserlian and Lévinasian insights – we may move on to ask about the lessons that we need to learn from this in our theoretical work on the human mind. First, and probably least controversially, I believe that we learn something about the deep relationality of the self. By this I mean that the self is not simply a social atom that may choose to connect with others or not. We cannot be "internalists" about the human self in the sense that knowledge about the individual in itself is sufficient to understand the person. Rather we should be "relationalists" in the sense that the self exists only as webs of relationships. It is worth quoting Attig again, since he argues that grief discloses for us the fact that the (Western) idea of selves as "self-contained social atoms" (2004, p. 348) is totally misguided, and we therefore need other metaphors in order to understand ourselves. He suggests viewing the self "as a web of caring connections to elements in the world around us. This self, in turn, is enmeshed within a web of webs encompassing our families and communities" (p. 348). We here find an echo of the famous closing words of Merleau-Ponty's magnus opus *Phenomenology of Perception*, which quotes de Saint-Exupéry: "Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him" (Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 530).

This is by no means an obvious approach to the self or the person in Western thought. From an anthropological viewpoint, Clifford Geertz has observed the following:

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. (Geertz 1983, p. 59).

And, coming from the discipline of philosophy, Charles Taylor has argued that the Western idea of the self as an inner realm of thoughts and feelings, which he traces and discusses throughout *Sources of the Self*, is "a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West and which may indeed spread thence to other parts of the globe, but which had a beginning in time and space and may have an end" (Taylor 1989, p. 111).

The contributions of Geertz and Taylor are immensely valuable, but the point of this article is to suggest that one may arrive at their conclusions, not just by discussing the historical and cultural emergence of ideas, but also (more directly) through a careful phenomenology of grief. As Ratcliffe says: "Studying the phenomenology of grief thus serves to illustrate the – often insufficiently acknowledged – extent to which the experienced world, our sense of rootedness within it and our ability to act in meaningful ways all depend upon other people" (Ratcliffe 2017, p. 16). The human capacity for grief shows us that our selves are deeply interconnected – permeable and open rather than bounded and closed as much of Western thought has presupposed. We saw above how Davis described Lévinas' view of the subject as "radically turned outwards" in relations to others. Fuchs explains: "Like hardly any other psychic phenomenon, grief discloses the fact that as human beings we are fundamentally related to, and in need of

others, that indeed our self is permeable and open to them" (Fuchs 2018, p. 48). And further: "This expansion and mutual overlap of selves may be regarded as the most essential presupposition of grief. […] This renders me fundamentally vulnerable, for in losing the other, I lose 'half of my self', as it were" (p. 49).

Losing something of oneself is arguably the most prevalent metaphor in people's accounts of grief. And if the analysis above is valid, we should actually take this metaphor very seriously, perhaps even quite literally. In a large study of people's reactions to grief, based on an online survey, 27% of respondents (out of more than 7000 people) reported that they "*never* went back to feeling like themselves after their loss" (Granek 2013, p. 282). When losing a loved one, one can in fact be said to lose a part of oneself, provided that the self is constituted by relations with others. This is a key finding in phenomenological studies of grief: That the habitually constituted intercorporeality between persons, which represents a significant aspect of the human self, is severed after bereavement, leading to a feeling of psychological amputation or loss of oneself. In his grief memoir, Lewis described it as follows: "I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense. It comes from the frustration of so many impulses that had become habitual. Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. for their object. Now their target is gone" (Lewis 1961, p. 41). The "target" is gone, but the impulses persist, quite like the feelings of a phantom limb.

I have argued here that a careful phenomenology of grief will in principle falsify those theories that understand the self as an atom, bounded and closed. The point in this context is not to explicate these (false) theories, nor to articulate better ones that actually do respect the deep relationality of the self. But philosophical contenders may include Taylor's view of the self as arising within "webs of interlocution" (Taylor 1989, p. 36) or MacIntyre's definition of human beings as "dependent rational animals" (MacIntyre 1999). I have left open the question about the exact nature of the self, including its relations to other key concepts such as the person, the subject or the individual, since the point is simply to demonstrate that a valid understanding of grief provides one with certain arguments that necessitate a relational notion of the self (which may come in many varieties) and excludes others that are non-relational. Psychological internalism and methodological individualism are ruled out, whenever one takes seriously the real characteristics of the phenomenon of grief.

The Limitations of Evolutionary Accounts

The evolutionary perspective on psychological phenomena has become extremely important, not just in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology specifically, but also in a much broader sense. One would probably be ridiculed if one were to question the evolutionary origin of Homo sapiens and its mind, and I have no intention of doing so here. Modern psychology is unthinkable without a background in evolutionary thinking, and, as I see it, this is how it should be, since any account of psychological phenomena must be able to explain the emergence of the mind, both in its natural and cultural historical forms. The question, however, is how much we can conclude about the human mind *directly* from an evolutionary framework and whether we can ever separate what has evolved naturally from what has been acquired culturally. The evolutionary framework has a tendency to approach psychological phenomena in terms

of their adaptive value and ask quite narrow questions about its utility, and in this light grief appears as particularly challenging. In their most simple forms, evolutionary accounts claim that present psychological functions exist because they have had survival value sometime in the past, often with (quite speculative) reference to life on the savannahs of East Africa around 100,000 years ago.

We may confront evolutionary psychology with the phenomenon of grief and ask how such a theoretical complex might be able to account for it. A classic authoritative source on the main tenets of evolutionary psychology is "Evolutionary psychology: A primer" by leading representative scholars Cosmides and Tooby, which appears as a programmatic text on the website of the Center for Evolutionary Psychology (Cosmides and Tooby 1997). In the primer, Cosmides and Tooby characterize evolutionary psychology in an admirably clear way by outlining what they see as its five fundamental principles, and they make clear that evolutionary psychology is not an area of study in psychology (like vision or cognition), but an *approach* to psychology as a whole. And they define psychology as (quotations from the website): "that branch of biology that studies (1) brains, (2) how brains process information, and (3) how the brain's information-processing programs generate behavior." The fundamental principles of evolutionary psychology include the following: "Our neural circuits were designed by natural selection to solve problems that our ancestors faced during our species' evolutionary history" (Principle 2), "Different neural circuits are specialized for solving different adaptive problems" (Principle 4), and the summative belief that "Our modern skulls house a Stone Age mind" (Principle 5).

Sometimes the theory is explained with reference to a Swiss army knife with different functions that have evolved to solve different existential tasks in the evolutionary past related to reproduction and survival. Then, the theory is often coupled with the modular approach to the mind found in much cognitive neuroscience that conceives of the mind as an array of separate functions or "modules". However, when we consider grief it is very difficult to account for this phenomenon within a modular and evolutionary framework. For what could the adaptive value be of the kind of "non-functional" behavior associated with bereavement? When grieving, a person will not engage in daily tasks of production and reproduction like before, and so this phenomenon simply seems to go against the evolutionary account. This explains why most grief scholars, who do subscribe to some form of evolutionary psychology, see it as a *byproduct* of something else that can indeed be understood in terms of survival value (Archer 1999). Archer points to the theory of John Bowlby, who proposed that grief – as a kind of separation distress – is useful in an evolutionary light, because it motivates the individual to seek reunion (p. 5). And, in a related way, the theory of grief articulated by Colin Murray Parkes viewed it "as a consequence of the way we form personal relationships" (p. 5). Thus, grief is from the evolutionary view, Archer concludes, "the cost we pay for being able to love in the way we do" (p. 5). It is a byproduct of the relationships we form as a social species. Later, Archer even says that "grief itself is maladaptive, but is connected to features which are adaptive" (p. 159) – *in casu* human relationality.

This is probably the best possible account of grief that one can give from an evolutionary perspective. There are other possibilities, for example that grief could have evolved as a way to signal to group members that one cannot take part in the ongoing struggles of hierarchy, but, in either case, it should lead us to seriously question a universally explanatory value of evolutionary psychology. For if there is

no adapted "grief module", and if grief in itself is maladaptive, then not just the emotion of grief in itself, but the numerous cultural practices of grief and mourning, seem incomprehensible. Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Peter Berger have emphasized the key social and cultural significance of grief: Durkheim argued that how bereaved people integrate the dead into their own lives "is central to how society itself perpetuates itself, for if the dead are not integrated then society disconnects from its own past and ultimately from itself" (Walter 1999, p. 20). And Berger went even further and said that every human society is, "in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death" (Berger quoted in Walter 1999, p. 21). So, humans have built pyramids and memorials, written testaments and created memorial funds, and constructed shrines, cemeteries and collected memorabilia in order to integrate the dead into life, and connect the past, present and future. In the words of grief researcher Leeat Granek, grief thus appears as "an affective thread that moves across societies, institutions, communities, and relationships" (Granek 2013, p. 283).

The point of mentioning all of this is to say that if a defining characteristic of *Homo sapiens* – viz. our capacity for grief and mourning – is not well understood within an evolutionary framework, then this should perhaps lead us to doubt whether evolutionary psychology and related perspectives really should be given the attention they currently receive as universal theories of human psychology. Again, I do not of course deny the reality of our evolutionary past, but there is probably not a direct route from this past and to an understanding of the psychological and existential realities of living persons in cultural contexts. What the evolutionary perspective lacks most specifically is an understanding of the sociocultural normativity of psychological phenomena such as grief, and with this we may turn to the third lesson to be learned from grief as a human phenomenon: The normativity of grief.

The Normativity of Psychological Phenomena

Although much psychology conventionally presents the discipline as a causal science seeking to uncover laws of human behavior, there is an argument that psychological phenomena are normative, rather than causal, which goes back to Aristotle. Although he understood psychological phenomena such as thoughts, emotions, and motivations in terms of the natural sciences of his times, he did not think that they could be fully understood from this perspective alone (see Brinkmann 2016, on which the following is based). We also need the perspective of the "dialectician" (an equivalent to modern cultural psychologists) in order to grasp it (Robinson 1989). For only the latter would rightly define e.g. anger "as the appetite for returning pain for pain, or something like that, while the former would define it as a boiling of the blood" (Aristotle quoted in Robinson 1989, p. 81). The dialecticians understand that anger (like grief or any other psychological phenomenon) is never just a physiological or neurological happening (like a "boiling of the blood" or some modern neurophysiological equivalent), but always also something done or performed, which is why there is such a thing as justified anger in the face of preposterousness (and there is certainly also unjustified anger). What makes "boiling of the blood" *anger* (or freezing of the blood *grief*, to imagine a physiological theory from Aristotle's time) is precisely that it is performed in a practical context where it makes sense to question, justify and state the reason for

"boiling of the blood". Anger and grief are thus psychological phenomena in so far as they are normative phenomena that can be done more or less well, and therefore are subject to praise and blame. If anger and grief belonged entirely to the realm of happenings, we should confine these phenomena to the science of physiology. As Harré (1983, p. 136) once noted, the reason why dread, anger, or grief, we might add, are psychological phenomena (i.e., emotions) but not indigestion or exhaustion – although all have behavioral manifestations as well as fairly distinctive experiential qualities – is that only the former are normative and thus subject to praise and blame.

We can sometimes say that some psychological process is clearly done – for example when someone is trying to perform mathematical operations, which cannot meaningfully be said to happen to the person. But most of our emotional life lies in a grey area: We might feel that our grief *occurs* to us after a loss, for example. We are overwhelmed by sadness, and think of ourselves as victims or sufferers in such a situation. However, even this kind of emotion is not simply a mechanical reaction that happens to occur like an effect following a cause. Grief is also *done* or *performed* by skilled human actors, who can only *grieve properly* if they know their local moral order (Harré 1983), i.e. know *how*, and *how much*, grief is called for in the social practices of their culture (Kofod and Brinkmann 2017). This is not to say that grief is an action that can simply be stopped (like playing football with friends, which stops whenever the players become bored with the game or are leaving because of other appointments). But it is to say that grief is not simply a mechanical *reaction*, but rather a *response* to a loss, and the loss is not simply a *cause* that mechanically triggers an emotion, but a *reason* for feeling and expressing grief. This also explains why grief (like other emotions) may be evaluated morally: The person who does not grieve sufficiently is easily seen as shallow or aloof (whether justified or not), whereas the person who is experiencing extreme grief in a situation that does not call for deep mourning can be accused of "overdoing it".

Kofod (2015) has recently studied parents' grief after the loss of an infant and found that they do not only struggle with the loss as such, but also with navigating the rather unclear normativity in this tragic situation: On the one hand, there is a cultural discourse claiming that the worst thing a human being can experience is the loss of a child, but, on the other, there is also a discourse implying (to put it bluntly) that the loss is supposed to be less intense when the child is so small at the time of its death (Kofod's participants have lost their children either before, during, or soon after giving birth) compared to older children that the parents "have gotten to know". How – and how much – should one grieve then? This is not an easy question, but one that Kofod's participants reflect upon, lending support to the idea that also difficult emotions that overwhelm us have a normative aspect.

So, to conclude, simply by looking at the phenomenon of grief, we arrive at the same conclusion that Aristotle articulated in his "hybrid psychology" a couple of millennia ago: That psychological phenomena such as grief are normative. I would like to add that this conclusion was also drawn by Husserl in his phenomenology (not exclusively about grief, but about human experience in general): Much of his work consisted of critiques of *psychologism*, i.e. the philosophical theory that logic can be explained with reference to how humans actually think and reason psychologically (in other words that logic is founded on psychology). Husserl reacted against this, because it would mean reducing the *normativity* of logic to *causal* explanations of how the psychological system works. And, more generally, there was in Husserl's phenomenology an

awareness of the normativity of our experience as such. Intentionality was a key concept from him, which he took from Brentano. It is common to characterize mental life by saying that intentionality is the mark of the mental. It means that experience is always *about* something – our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and actions are always directed at something. But, as Crowell (2009) puts it in his account of Husserl's phenomenology, "intentionality is not simply the static presence of a 'presentation' in a mental experience (*Erlebnis*) but a normatively oriented *claim to validity*" (p. 13). In colloquial terms, this means that what we experience (e.g. grief) can only intentionally be "about" something (e.g. a loss), because there are more and less correct and valid ways of experiencing it (normatively). For example, we may see a dangerous snake in the forest, but – on closer scrutiny – it may turn out to be an innocent branch, and our intentional orientation toward the object involves a normative underpinning of trying to "get it right". Simply put, it means that we experience normativity, valences and values in objects and events – something the Gestalt psychologists took up in great detail after Husserl (e.g. Köhler 1959).

Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that a valid way of building theories of the mind and mental life is to begin with Kant's transcendental question: X exists – how is it possible? I have tested and illustrated this way of working theoretically by putting grief as a phenomenon in the place of X. Grief exists – what must a theory of mental life look like in order to account for its possibility? I therefore began with a phenomenology of the X – i.e., grief – building on a combination of Husserlian and Lévinasian insights. From the Husserlian perspective, we saw that grief is inscribed in the body of the bereaved as the loss of a system of possibilities, and from the Lévinasian perspective, we found an insistence to focus on the deceased other as other (and not just as reducible to my representation of the other), which means that grief is also an ontological event, responding to the fact that someone perishes. Here there is a distrust of representational theories of the mind and an insistence to be iconoclasts, to use the expression from C.S. Lewis.

From these phenomenological descriptions, I went on to draw three general psychological lessons: First, that grief teaches us that any theory of mental life must acknowledge the deep relationality of the self; second, that evolutionary accounts that look for the adaptive value of psychological functions and experiences are severely limited; and third, that mental life and its phenomena are normative in the sense that they do not just happen (like mechanical reactions), but are lived and enacted in a normative space of reasons. This space, I have argued elsewhere, is constituted by sociocultural practices that should be in focus for cultural psychologists and other students of the human mind (Brinkmann 2006, 2016).

I hope that scholars in psychology will engage in the kind of exercise that this article has exemplified, only with phenomena other than grief, since I believe that a careful phenomenological understanding of the various fully developed phenomena in psychology will be able to challenge the often simplistic and reductive theories of the discipline of psychology.

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