



A Hopeless Search for the Hopeless: a Literature Review of Contemporary Qualitative Studies on Partner Bereavement

Alfred Bordado Sköld¹ 

Received: 1 April 2020 / Revised: 1 June 2020 / Accepted: 3 June 2020 /

Published online: 1 July 2020

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020

Abstract

This literature review examines qualitative studies on partner bereavement from the year 2000 to 2018. The aim is to investigate which perspectives, theories, and models are prominent in this research, and how contemporary sociocultural trends might be related hereto. After giving a brief account of grief research in a historical perspective with a point of departure in partner bereavement and the development of a qualitative methodology within grief research, the following five theoretical frameworks are presented on the background of a close reading of the included 18 studies: continuing bonds, meaning and narrative reconstruction, the dual process model, post-traumatic growth, and disenfranchised grief. In the discussion, I pinpoint how the popularity and influence of these frameworks are related to contemporary sociocultural tendencies and ideologies. It is suggested that a greater awareness with regard to the cultural mediation of experiences and understandings of grief would be beneficial. Specifically, I argue that all the reviewed frameworks—in different ways, remain disturbed by a contemporary inability of handling suffering and impossibilities.

Keywords Grief · Literature review · Partner · Qualitative studies · Partner bereavement · Suffering · Hopelessness

Introduction

There is general agreement within grief research that Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (2005) can be seen as the first contribution to a scientific understanding of grief (Archer 2008). Freud's attempt to distinguish melancholia from 'normal grief' can likewise be seen as a move on the cornerstone in the development from a romantic to a modern

✉ Alfred Bordado Sköld
alfred@hum.aau.dk

¹ Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Kroghstræde 3, 9220 Aalborg, Denmark

understanding of grief (Walter 2017; Holte Kofod 2017). Whereas the romantic lover held on to the memory of the deceased no matter the price, modernity has come to view grief as a linear and finite process. And whereas the melancholic unconsciously incorporate the deceased, the normally bereaved person—at least according to a superficial reading of Freud—works his or her way through the grief process and finally let go. Love relationships are hereby seen primarily as instruments for satisfying individual needs (Klass et al. 1996). Even though the loss of a loved one causes great pain, letting go and forming new relationships are perceived as the achievable and final goal of the grief process.

This ‘grief work hypothesis’ became highly influential to grief research in the twentieth century (Stroebe and Schut 1999). In the psychoanalytical tradition, Lieberman, Bowlby, and Parkes all developed grief models that inherited Freud’s thought of grief being a psychological task that the individual could carry out to a more or less successful degree (Wortman and Silver 1989). In Kübler-Ross’s (1973) model, which is inspired by the emotional progression terminally ill persons are facing, grief is likewise expected to end in a state of acceptance. In all these perspectives, grief is seen as a ‘stressor which upsets the equilibrium of the person’ (Yalom and Lieberman 1991), and a return to the status quo, resolution, or recovery as the goal of bereavement (Balk 2004; Rosenblatt 2007).

Loss of partner or spouse and widowhood specifically play an important part in the development of grief theory. According to Holst-Warhaft (2000), women have throughout history, in a wide range of otherwise diverse cultures, been the ‘carriers of grief’, and Walter (1999) observes that grief studies is one of the few academic discipline where women’s voices have been heard and been allowed to make a profound mark upon the theoretical development. The early empirical development of grief research (Marris 1958; Parkes 1970) is often criticised for being based exclusively on experiences of older widows from the English-speaking world (Valentine 2008). This neglected not only other cultures and groups but also other types of loss, for example, parent and child loss that have received increasing attention in the last decades (Dyregrov 1990). The rationale for this could be that men die earlier, and that widowhood, therefore, is a more prevalent phenomenon than widowerhood and the experiences of younger bereaved people. Furthermore, it is often pointed out that women are generally more prone to share personal experiences and, therefore, generally, are more accessible in grief research.

The history of grief research on partner bereavement testifies to the fact that the process of grieving is tightly connected not only to the specific relationship but also to marriage as an institution and sociocultural understandings of love and romantic relationships. Even though it is not always made explicit, the studies reviewed here confirm that challenges faced by widows and widowers today cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural climate. Early studies of widowhood considered the final proof of grief resolution as a desire to remarry, assuming widowed women unable to live a meaningful life by themselves (Hobson 1964). Widowers were, on the other hand, often said to be unable to handle the daily routines, and their persistent drive to remarry was explained by a need to get life back on track (Daggett 2002). In this light, some of the normativities surrounding grief were a high degree of dependency between the sexes, heterosexuality, and, as we have seen above, grief understood as a finite process. Some of the studies included in this review testify to the fact that bereaved people still face these expectations, but the number and art of competing normativities that bereaved individuals navigate between has increased and changed significantly (Brinkmann and Kofod 2018). These normativities concern not only the way we perceive couple relationship but likewise includes broader features of what counts as a good life. Carried out as part of

the research centre *The Culture of Grief*¹ that specifically examines grief experiences through a number of empirical projects, and “the cultural setting and conception of happiness and distress within which grief is situated in our time” (The Culture of Grief n.d., p. 1), this review pays close attention to the way our contemporary notions of suffering and the good life influence qualitative research on partner bereavement. Throughout this focus, the review transcends the particular focus on partner bereavement and touches upon issues related to grief in a general.

A New Paradigm?

The perspectives presented in this review testify in several ways to the paradigm shift that has taken place within grief research since the beginning of the nineties (Klass et al. 1996). The new paradigm grows out from an increased awareness among clinicians and researchers that see grief as a highly individual experience linked to personal characteristics and coping strategies, and the meaning ascribed to the specific relationship with the deceased (Stroebe and Schut 2010). Objections to the use of stage and task models, and the thought of grief work, resolution, and acceptance were primarily raised from clients not recognising themselves in the models and clinicians speaking their case (Walter 2017). According to Klass et al. (1996), a qualitative methodology contributes to a global critique of positivistic, mechanistic, and therefore, reductionistic view on science that “loses sight of the complex social and historical context in which human behaviour takes place” (p. 21). That bereavement is now seen as a far more multifaceted process, highly affected by both the psychological setup of the bereaved, the art of relationship to the deceased, and the surrounding sociocultural climate, is to a certain extent made clear from the frameworks included in this study.

Establishing a continuing bond to the deceased is no longer perceived as a dysfunctional or pathological defence but as part of a normal grief process. The dual process model is often seen as a paradigmatic illustration of this development, incorporating a diverse view on grief that includes a wide range of grief reactions that formerly have been looked upon as mutually excluding. Constructivist and narrative theories emphasise the role of language in regard to personal identity, intersubjective relationships, and worldviews, as well as the ability to create meaningful and coherent life stories as essential to bereavement. The thought that grief can stimulate a form of post-traumatic growth has grown out from a meeting between existential and positive psychology and is gaining increasing influence. Finally, the concept of disenfranchised grief comes from a greater awareness of minority groups’ grief experiences not being sufficiently recognised.

In the first part of the article, I will provide a detailed analysis of how these frameworks are applied in the included studies. In the following discussion, I will point out a number of critical aspects that make it dubious to what extent we can speak of a “new paradigm”. I argue that the mentioned frameworks and theories remain ideologically indoctrinated by certain predominant features of our present cultural condition that makes the delineation to earlier grief-theories less radical than is often argued. In particular, I point out how they—despite their explicit interest in bereavement, lack an ability to conceptualize the unfathomable suffering that is part of grief and the hopelessness that often colours the world of the bereaved. In a time where grief is increasingly being perceived in a diagnostic light, I pinpoint how the task of giving voice to this suffering is becoming increasingly important. In this light, I pose a number of intricate

¹ www.sorg.aau.dk

questions that ought to be investigated by future qualitative studies within the field of bereavement studies.

Methods

The studies included in this literature review are based on searches in PsychINFO, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and via the internal databases in journals dealing with bereavement, death, and dying such as *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying*, *Mortality*, and *Death Studies*. Keywords used were grief/bereavement/loss, spouse/partner, and qualitative research/study. Bibliographies in the relevant articles have been checked for further references. The outlined frameworks were found via an iterative process that involved close readings of the found articles, formulation of preliminary categories, and re-reading based on these (see Table 1).

Studies dating before the year 2000 were not included in the review, the goal being to provide a state-of-the-art overview of contemporary qualitative grief research on partner bereavement. Studies dealing with anticipatory grief and studies focusing on the experience of living with a deadly sick partner were excluded as well. This is because these grief processes are characterised to a significant degree by the specific difficulties that arise from living with a partner with, for example cancer, dementia, or AIDS. Whereas some of deceased partners in the included articles have, indeed, died from the mentioned diseases, issues related hereto are not their main focus.

The literature search makes it clear that a phenomenological framework is the most popular choice of methodology when investigating partner bereavement in a qualitative manner. The phenomenological studies explicitly try to capture the ‘lived experience’ of the bereaved. In many cases, the stories told are thereafter hermeneutically interpreted, and predominant themes accentuated. Other frameworks, such as grounded theory, narrative interviews, and open-ended surveys were used as well, but to a much lesser degree. No studies were excluded on the basis of methodological orientation as long as they fell within the category of qualitative studies. The search was stopped by the time no new perspectives were arising, and while there is a possibility of other studies within the relevant category, they are not likely to alter the results of this literature review in any substantial manner. The semi-structured interview is by far the most used research strategy with the number of informants ranging from three to 25. The great majority of the included 18 articles have their origins in the Anglo-American world.

Results

In this section, I outline the five frameworks and give examples of how they figure in the reviewed articles. It could be argued that the aspect of how the death of a partner affects relationships with family members, friends, and others would deserve a separate category. Because this aspect overlaps to a high degree with several of the chosen categories, I have opted not to treat this separately but included it in the discussion of the others. The order of the categories is based on the degree to which the different perspectives were found in the reviewed articles, continuing bonds being referred to the most often. It is indeed worth mentioning that there are several internal overlaps between the different perspectives, a point that will be developed further in the discussion.

Table 1 Included studies

Study	Population	Method(s)	Relevant findings/themes	Frameworks
Richardson, T. (2014). Spousal bereavement in later life: a material culture perspective, <i>Mortality</i> , 19(1), 61–79	20 older widows and widowers, English population	Qualitative interviews	The deceased is present through material emergent objects; Memory is dynamic, sedimented, and inter-corporeal.	Continuing bonds, material culture studies, embodiment
O'Brien, J. M., Forrest, L. M. and Austin, A. E. (2002). Death of a partner: perspectives of heterosexual and gay men. <i>Journal of Health Psychology</i> , 7(3), 317–328.	6 heterosexual and 6 gay men who had experienced the untimely death of their partner, urban American population	Semi-structured interviews	Men's specific grief-problems are shaped by male gender socialisation, which makes them reluctant to seek emotional support. Similarities and differences between heterosexual and gay men exist.	Disenfranchised grief, gender studies
Bennet, K. M. and Vidal-Hall, S. (2000). Narratives of death: a qualitative study of widowhood in later life. <i>Aging and Society</i> , 20, 413–428.	20 widows aged 60–80, English population	Semi-structured interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Widows give elaborate narratives to events surrounding their husband's death. Thereby, they commit to the memory, establish a continuing bond, and make public presentation possible.	Meaning and narrative reconstruction, continuing bonds
Harrison, T., Kahn, D. L. and Hsu, M. (2005). A hermeneutical phenomenological study of widowhood for African American women. <i>OMEGA</i> , Vol. 50(29), 131–149.	11 African American widows	Semi-structured interviews, hermeneutical phenomenology	The women struggle with finding a new place in the local community, appropriate expressions for grief, and a balance between a continuing bond and a more independent lifestyle.	Meaning and narrative reconstruction, post-traumatic growth, continuing bonds
Fasse, L. and Zech, E. (2016). Dual process model of coping with bereavement in the test of the subjective experiences of bereaved spouses: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. <i>OMEGA</i> , Vol. 74(2), 212–238.	16 widows and widowers aged 42–69, who had lost their spouse 18 to 29 months before, French population	Semi-structured interviews, IPA	The informants generally endorsed the dual process model, though they experience loss and restoration process as concurrent and intertwined. Conscious coping can furthermore be connected to guilt, and strategies are employed non-intentionally. Respite can function as an 'every day without grief'.	The dual process model, continuing bonds
Dagget, L. M. (2002). Living with loss: middle-aged men face spousal bereavement. <i>Qualitative Health Research</i> , Vol. 12, 5.	8 men aged 40 to 60, English population	In-depth phenomenological interviews	The grief process is understood as a 'journey' from irreconcilable loss counted by disbelief, confusion, anger, and guilt, through the struggle to 'living through' via coping	Meaning and narrative reconstruction, the dual process model

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Population	Method(s)	Relevant findings/themes	Frameworks
Collins, T. (2017). Conducting longitudinal research with older widows. <i>Journal of Women and Aging</i> , vol. 29, 2, 102–114	26 older widows, English population	Longitudinal study, semi-structured interviews, personal community di-grams	strategies, support seeking, and finally, the reconstructing of a future. The meaning of relations to friends and children change radically after the death of a husband. These changes are affected by normative understandings of grief and social relationships.	Grief as a normative phenomenon
Chi Ho Chan, W. and Chan, C. L. W. (2011). Acceptance of spousal death: the factor of time in bereaved older adults' search for meaning. <i>Death Studies</i> , 35:2, 147–162	15 widows and widowers, aged 65 or above, Chinese population	Interviews, grounded theory	Time was considered essential in several respects. The timing of death was seen as important as well as the ability to remember the shared life with the deceased partner and to imagine a future. Self-transcendence as a way of overcoming experiences of 'truncated time'.	Shattered worldview, meaning and narrative reconstruction
Bennet, G. and Bennet, K. M. (2000). The presence of the dead: an empirical study. <i>Mortality</i> , 5:2, 139–157	19 widows, age 60 to 76, lost their spouse 2 to 26 years ago, English population	Interviews	Two competing views on the presence of the dead are suggested, one rationalist/materialist and one supernatural. The widow's way of expressing these experiences depend on con-text and audience.	Continuing bonds, grief as a normative phenomenon
Taylor, N. C. and Robinson, W. D. (2016). The lived experience of young widows and widowers. <i>The American Journal of Family Therapy</i> , 44:2, 67–79	12 widows and widowers (mean age 35 years old), lost their spouse around 4 years	Semi-structured focus-group inter-views	The young population was challenged by loss of social identity, worries regarding family life or pregnancy, and finding a fitting balance in regard to social support. Humour was found to be an important coping mechanism.	Meaning and narrative reconstruction
Haase, T. J. and Johnston, N (2012). Making meaning out of loss: a story and study of young widowhood. <i>Journal of Creativity in Mental Health</i> , 7, 204–221 Jones, E. et al. (2018). Lived experience of young widowed individuals: a qualitative study. <i>Death Studies</i> , 1–10	11 widows (mean age 33 years old), lost their spouse on average 16 months ago, American population 11 widows and widowers (8/3), mean age 34.64, spouse dead on average 16 months ago,	Semi-structured interviews, phenomenological analysis Semi-structured interviews, Hermeneutical	Participants struggle with handling the shock, finding a new identity without the deceased, making meaning out of the loss, and taking care of material belongings. The quality of the relationship before the death is considered important. Coping with the prospect of navigating in the world after death	Meaning and narrative reconstruction, continuing bonds Kubler-Ross's stage model, The Dual Process Model

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Population	Method(s)	Relevant findings/themes	Frameworks
Rodger, M. L. et al. (2006). Living beyond the unanticipated sudden death of a partner: a phenomenological study. <i>OMEGA</i> , 54(2), 107–133	15 widows and widowers (10/5), aged 18 to 65, spouse lost within 5 years, Australian population	Phenomenological analysis Phenomenological analysis (Giorgi)	involves use of literature, a continuing bond, cognitive processes, and spirituality. Experiencing a partner's sudden unexpected death necessitates controlling the 'dosage' of grief—testifying to DPM. Participants are sceptical about the concept of 'grief resolution', and 'memorialisation capsule' is suggested as a way of conceptualising the continued place of the deceased.	The dual process model, Hogan's experimental model of grief, continuing bonds
Spaten, O. M., Byrjaalsen, M. N. and Langdridge, D. (2011). Men's grief, meaning and growth: a phenomenological investigation into the experience of loss. <i>Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology</i> , 11:2	3 widowers, aged 32 to 54, lost their partner to cancer between 3 to 7 years ago, Danish population	Semi-structured interviews, hermeneutical phenomenological analysis (Van Manen)	The widowers immediate experience their lifeworld and identity as shattered and a loss of meaning and purpose in life. Anger is likewise suggested to be a prominent theme, previously overlooked within grief research. The widowers express greater existential insight after the loss.	Existential psychology, the dual process model, narratives, post-traumatic growth
Lowe, M. E. and McClement, S. E. (2010). Spousal bereavement: the lived experience of young Canadian widows. <i>OMEGA</i> , 62, (2), 127–148	5 widows, 45 years or younger, bereaved for 1 to 8 years, Canadian population	In-depth, unstructured interviews, phenomenological analysis	Widows experience losing their life companion and co-parent as well as hopes and dreams for the future. Their widowhood affects their relationship to children and friends, and their status as single is seen as confusing. The widows had different strategies for continuing the bond with their lost partner.	Meaning and narrative reconstruction, continuing bonds
Danforth, M. M. and Glass, J. C. (2001). Listen to my words, give meaning to my sorrow: a study in cognitive constructs in middle-age bereaved widows. <i>Death Studies</i> , 25, 513–529	Six widows, aged 51 to 56, bereaved for 18 months to 5 years	Unstructured narrative interviews	The widows experience their husband's death as an existential crisis with both their assumptive world and expectations for the future being shattered. Meaning-making is experienced as a change in perspective which is seen to take several years.	Meaning and narrative reconstruction, shattered world view, post-traumatic growth
Jenkins et al. (2014). Older lesbians and bereavement: experiencing the loss of a partner. <i>Journal of Gerontological Social Work</i> ,	45 lesbian widows, mean age 64.6 years	Open-ended survey	Participants experience isolation from their deceased partner, the partner's family, and the health and support system. They experienced	Disenfranchised grief, gender studies,

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Population	Method(s)	Relevant findings/themes	Frameworks
57:2-4, 273-287	6 lesbian widows, aged 50 to 70	In-depth, open-ended interviews; phenomenological analysis	<p>having to struggle to make their voices heard both before and after the death.</p> <p>The study focuses on the art of social support received by the bereaved. Whether the relationship was disclosed to the surroundings before the death of the partner made a great impact.</p>	Disenfranchised grief

Continuing Bonds

Several studies consider a continued bond to the deceased partner to be of great importance to the grief process (Jones et al. 2018; Lowe and McClement 2011; Chan and Chan 2011; Harrison et al. 2005; Bennett and Vidal-Hall 2000; Bennett and Bennett 2000; Richardson 2014). That the relationship does not end with the partner's death but continues to play a vital role for the partner still alive can, therefore, not be underestimated. The question of how this influence is manifested and experienced at different times in the years to follow is an aspect that not only has revolutionised grief research but changed our views on death and dying. The death of a loved partner affects the bereaved in various ways during the life to come, and the theory of continuing bonds tries to safeguard this dynamic. In the following, I firstly pinpoint the influence of age in regard to the meaning ascribed to the continuing bond and secondly the question of how this very bond is understood.

Both Jones et al. (2018) and Lowe and McClement (2011) investigate the experience of young widowhood and point out how the continuing bonds have a special meaning for this population. They were widowed at an age where pregnancy or having young children living at home are common. These widows, therefore, have the double task of handling their grief as well as mediating the children's relationship to the parent they no longer have. The 'daddy box', where some of the memorabilia are placed, is an example of how this last effort is carried out (Lowe and McClement 2011). Rodger et al. (2007) suggest the concept of a 'memorialisation capsule' as a way of capturing the surviving partner's experience of creating a mental space dedicated to the memory of the deceased partner. It is pointed out that this capsule can be both intentionally revisited and seen to intrude when prompted in a certain way. For widows not having children, shared pets can serve both as a reminder of the partner and a way of recalling good memories (Jones et al. 2018). The older African-American widows in Harrison et al. (2005) manage to keep their positive memories alive while adjusting to the new life-situation with a large amount of social support from the surrounding community. Marriage had been of immense social, legal, and emotional importance to the lives of these women, and all expressed gratitude without idealising their deceased husbands.

Two studies (Richardson 2014; Bennett and Bennett 2000) highlight how the possessions left by the deceased contribute to the continued bond. Richardson (2014) focuses on how the embodied aspect of bereavement affects the art of the continued bond to the deceased. In her view, the modalities of vision and hearing have been thoroughly investigated, hereby, overlooking touch and smell.² This might well be explained by a prevailing view that sees contact with possessions as 'a maladaptive form of coping' compared with memories that are seen as internalised intra-psychologically and thereby separated from the material realm (Field et al. 1999). In this perspective, hanging onto possessions is considered an understandable immediate reaction but, in the long run, seen as interfering with the project of 'moving on' (Rubin 1984).

Richardson (2014) perceives the possessions of the deceased as 'emergent memory objects', having metonymic status. That is, they not only represent the lost loved one but stand as if it is him or her. The intra-corporeality (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012) characterising human relationships blurs bodily and material borders, and possessions hereby 'take on' the life of the deceased. In this light, the continued bond is kept through repeated and sustained interaction with the environment once shared. Several of Richardson's informants see the material aspects

² See Brinkmann and Kofod (2018) for a view on grief as an extended emotion.

of seasonal rhythms, routines, and traditions as a way of maintaining a bond to the lost partner. For example, one of Richardson's informants speak about shifting the same curtains as the deceased wife once used to do on a regular basis is a way of continuing the bond to her (Richardson 2014).

Bennett and Bennett (2000) argue based on two qualitative studies conducted 15 years apart that the sense of presence is a lasting phenomenon and not bound to a specific stage in the bereavement process which has been suggested by Field et al. (1999). A large majority of the older widows interviewed in the studies recognise feeling the presence of their husbands, experiences described on a continuum from 'ineffable feeling' to clear 'sensory experiences'. In explaining these phenomena, the women rely on two distinct discourses, much depending on the audience. In the medical discourse, these experiences are framed 'as if...' and referred to as 'hallucinations', 'dreams', and so forth. In the supernatural discourse, great emphasis is placed on 'that he was actually here', and the experience described as 'real' (Bennett and Bennett 2000).

A continuing bond is hereby seen as an important aspect of adjusting to life after losing a partner in various ways. The deceased person is 'present' via objects, activities, and by confronting people who function as a reminder of the missing partner. The issues that arise from this vary substantially depending on life situation and culture. Whereas younger widows and widowers contemplate how to integrate new love relationships with the one still ongoing with the former partner, many older widows and widowers express gratefulness for the time they had together and rely on social and religious frameworks in their endeavour to continue the bond to the deceased. With regard to the ontological status of the deceased, figurative speech is used to demystify the experience, even though a large number of bereaved individuals insist on the 'realness' of the other's presence.

Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction

A partner plays an important part in the meaningful web of relationships in which persons are immersed (Attig 2010), and their death threatens deeply held assumptions about the world (Janoff-Bulman 2014). This opens up for a range of questions regarding meaning, which likewise figures as one of the more common themes for bereaved partners. According to Gillies and Neimeyer (2006), the process of meaning reconstruction in which the deceased is engaged has three components: sense-making, benefit finding, and identity change. While sense-making and benefit finding clearly will be seen as separate processes (Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema 2001), how we understand the loss and how it affects us also impact our personal narratives. As the reviewed studies testify to, questions such as 'Why did he die?', 'Why me?', and 'Who am I without him/her?' are tightly intertwined, and the reviewed studies testify to the fact that meaning and narratives are central to many of the respondents' grief experiences.

In Haase and Johnston (2012), it becomes clear that the partner was an important part of the personal identity of the surviving young widows. The border between self and other is a hard line to draw as evinced in statements such as 'When a spouse dies, you die' and 'Our identities were intertwined. So I lost mine.' (Haase and Johnston 2012, p. 212). The process of meaning-seeking in Daggett (2002) is likewise stimulated by a feeling of having lost part of oneself and a 'desperate' struggle to find some meaning to this: 'There has to be a reason'. Participation in the study is here regarded as an integrated part of this struggle, the hope being that sharing the story will make it more bearable (see also Spaten et al. 2011).

In Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000), giving the event meaning was important for social purposes as well. Being able to tell the story in a coherent and meaningful way to others was seen as an important way of gaining understanding and support. Moreover, recalling the days and hours surrounding their husbands' death was perceived to be of great importance and a condition for establishing a continuing bond. Regarding this, several studies (Harrison et al. 2005; Chan and Chan 2011) accentuate the importance of saying goodbye in a proper way and the meaning of the place of death. Having experienced the caring environment as insufficient is something many bereaved individuals have trouble accepting, and this is seen as interfering with the effort to see the partner's death in a meaningful light.

Sense-making in this perspective focuses on finding 'acceptable causes' of death and thereby being able to make the event understandable. To nuance this, Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) point out that whether finding meaning is seen as helpful depends on a range of personal and social factors. The older African-American widows in Harrison et al. (2005) did not find meaning-seeking to be a particularly troublesome part of the grieving process. The fact that a large majority of them had a robust religious identity and belief is assumed to be part of the explanation for this. In sharp contrast hereto, the young widows in Haase and Johnston (2012) and Jones et al. (2018) experience the loss of their husbands to be a great challenge regarding both experiencing the world as a meaningful place and their identity. At the same time as they express doubt when it comes to identifying themselves as 'single', they feel confused when being asked if they are married. The questions of remarrying are seen as something they are expected to take an active stance towards but are uncomfortable with. Moreover, their relationships with friends and role as a parent have changed radically. Losing a partner at this young age is also to suffer several parallel losses regarding both other relationships and dreams and hopes for the future (Ratcliffe 2018).

Even though there are differences regarding how younger and older people relate to the death of a partner (Bennett and Vidal-Hall 2000), being older is by no means a guarantee that the death is seen as natural and, as such, meaningful. Danforth and Glass Jr (2001) investigate loss in middle adulthood, 'a time when women tend to re-examine direction and meaning due to transitions in life' (p. 515). This is most likely the case for men as well, and the loss of a partner surely complicates this process. For the widows interviewed in this study, it was not until several years after the loss that they 'got a grasp on life again'.

For the older widows and widowers in Chan and Chan (2011), an inability to find meaning in the loss was associated with a high degree of suffering that shaped both the experience of the present as meaningless and the future as hopeless. Time was experienced as 'truncated' after the death of their spouse. In one move, both their future and past was annihilated: 'Acceptance of spousal death was inhibited by the failure of meaning searching from the present, and the continuity of time was disrupted' (Chan and Chan 2011, p. 154). This inability to keep the memories alive in a meaningful way led to isolation and a feeling of being locked up in a 'meaningless now'. Even though their spouses died at old age, the timing was often seen as 'inappropriate'.

That 'meaning' is a key word for understanding the existential struggles of late modernity (Badiou 2016) is confirmed by these studies. Rather than accepting death as meaningless, finding appropriate ways of explaining the event, integrating it into one's life story—and focusing on the positive changes are indeed vital aspects for many bereaved people. The task of finding meaning and explanatory models is seen as part and parcel of the healing process. In the discussion, I will relate the importance given to meaning to broader societal tendencies.

The Dual Process Model

The dual process model of coping with bereavement (DPM) (Stroebe and Schut 1999) has received increased attention over the last decades and is being used both explicitly and implicitly in qualitative grief studies as well. The model posits a healthy grief reaction as being characterised by a flexible oscillation between a loss-oriented (LO) and a restoration-oriented (RO) process. DPM thus accepts both the need ‘to grief-work’ by confronting the loss and the necessity to move on and focus on other aspects of life. It hereby features a postmodern view of grief as being characterised by romantic as well as modernistic features, where holding on and letting go are not mutually exclusive options (Walter 1999; Klass et al. 1996).

In their interpretative phenomenological study, Fasse and Zech (2016) explicitly investigate whether informants could recognise themselves in DPM. They conclude that a large majority of French middle-aged widows and widowers does so. This being said, they suggest several ‘subtle modifications’ to the model. First of all, the LO and RO are not easily distinguished and often intermixed. Loss is often confronted while being in the RO mode, and restoration is likewise seen as something that requires constant confrontation with the loss. For the bereaved interviewed by Fasse and Zech (2016), ‘the two ways of responding, LO and RO, are intermixed to such a point that they are practically the same’ (p. 221). Second, the intentionality of the coping processes is questioned. Both LO and RO are generally seen as something that primarily happens non-intentionally: ‘It is ‘life’ and its imperatives that impose these tendencies [...], from the outside...’ (p. 226), and this absence of causality is not seen as threatening but in line with the general chaotic state of affairs of the bereaved. Third, ‘respite’ is suggested as a condition separate from both RO and LO, an ‘everyday life without grief’ often stimulated by significant others and generally perceived as associated with emotional well-being.

Rodger et al. (2007) testify to the need for ‘dosage of grieving’ (Stroebe and Schut 1999) in their study of Australian widows and widowers. Perceiving loss as unresolvable and grieving as an infinite process requires ‘that some distancing from unpleasant emotion is needed’ (Walter 1999). The need for respite testifies to the flexibility that the model posits—bereavement is indeed a social phenomenon that becomes adjusted depending on contextual factors. The ‘life’ that interferes from the outside is, to a high degree, the relational world of other people. The painful fact that the world moves on after the loss of another hereby also becomes possibilities for the respite needed to endure.

Daggett (2002) phenomenological study of English middle-age men who have lost their spouse likewise relies on DPM in their model illustrating irreconcilable loss. The reclamation and reconstruction of a life go through the two tracks of ‘responding to the loss’ and ‘living through the loss’ (p. 630), and it is likewise argued that the two processes occur simultaneously. The theory of post-traumatic growth, which we will turn to in the next section, puts an even greater emphasis on restoring life after losing a loved one. Within this framework, grief is not exclusively seen as an obstacle to be confronted or a condition that we need to learn how to live with, but likewise a source of personal and existential growth.

Post-traumatic Growth

The post-traumatic growth perspective is likewise tightly connected to the reconstruction of meaning and narrative mentioned above. It differs though regarding the expectations connected to the grief process. Where the endeavour of creating meaning and rewriting the personal

narrative is re-constructive and aims at handling and managing the loss, the concept of post-traumatic growth—in line with the general strength-focused perspective of positive psychology (Lopez and Snyder 2002; Seligman 2002) presents this process not only as a return to the status quo but as a way of stimulating personal growth and development in the light of grief.

According to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), positive changes regarding the struggle with bereavement falls in five general categories: the experience of the emergence of new possibilities, changes in relationships with others, an increased sense of personal strengths, a greater appreciation for life, and changes in existential and spiritual orientations. According to Yalom and Lieberman (1991), talking from an existential psychological perspective that shares vital aspects with this paradigm, there is a significant relationship between existential awareness and personal growth. In their perspective, the inevitability of death, questions about the deeper meaning of life, and/or what their purpose is, and if they are troubled by regrets for the life lived so far become highly relevant for bereaved people after the loss of partner. An ability to take these existential challenges seriously is hereby seen as a condition for managing the loss in a constructive way.

In the words of Bennett and Bennett (2000), ‘Following the death of a spouse, the bereaved partner has, in effect, two choices: to die or to continue living’ (p. 1). On the basis of the studies reviewed here, there can be no doubt that the death of a partner is an immensely life-transforming event that will be inscribed with a before and after in the lives of the bereaved. Even though the studies included in this review do not allow for any generalisations in regard to the existential questions raised here, several of the mentioned aspects are taken up by both participants and researchers. ‘To continue living’ demands an active stance, and the process of grieving is often referred to as a ‘struggle’ (Spaten et al. 2011; Lowe and McClement 2011). Many of the bereaved refer to themselves as ‘survivors’ (Danforth and Glass Jr., 2001), and grief is not seen as a natural process but something that requires an immense effort.

How this effort has resulted in personal and existential growth is described in several of the reviewed studies. In Spaten et al. (2011), ‘the participants all spoke of having learned a number of things as a result of their experience of loss’ (p. 10), thus confirming several of the aspects mentioned by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2007). The participating middle-age Danish men testify to existential and spiritual growth, a greater appreciation of life, and a more caring and tolerant way of being with others, a development that is seen as a result of an intense existential struggle. In Harrison et al. (2005), life without a partner was seen as an opportunity for increased autonomy. ‘When one widow was asked what widowhood meant to her, she said, ‘freedom!’ (p. 145). Life as a widow was likewise, in Danforth and Glass (2001), seen as requiring ‘critical awareness and reflection processes’ that made ‘experiences to insight and new meaning’ possible. Interestingly Chan and Chan (2011) describe self-transcendence as the most constructive way to tackle the loss. Engaging in activities that made people forget, both about themselves and their lost loved ones, was seen as one of the few things that could ease the pain. In Harrison et al. (2005), a more everyday form of ‘keeping busy’ is likewise seen as a key to handle otherwise overwhelming emotions: ‘Once you get busy, it leaves’ (p. 141) as one of their informants eloquently put it.

Disenfranchised Grief

In Doka (1999), disenfranchised grief is defined as ‘grief experienced by those who incur a loss, that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported’ (p. 37). Disenfranchisement has, in due course, become a multifaceted concept involving both

non-recognised relationships (e.g. homosexual relationships), losses seen as unworthy of grieving (e.g. perinatal loss and abortions), grievers that due to age or mental disabilities are looked upon as 'unable to grieve' or extraordinary circumstances surrounding the death (e.g. suicides, AIDS), and certain ways of grieving (e.g. lack of strong affective response) (Doka 1989; Doka 2002). Even though disenfranchised grief cannot be counted as a framework on the same level as continuing bonds, meaning and narrative construction, the two-track model and post-traumatic growth, it plays an important part in several of the studies and is likewise interesting in a sociocultural perspective.

In Attig's (2004) critical perspective, disenfranchised grief is not only the result of a lack of empathy but likewise a political and ethical failure. Respect for the bereaved person transcends empathy with the experienced pain and suffering; it includes an acknowledgement of the existential struggle to restore a meaningful life after losing a loved one.

Generally, losing a partner is still seen as a severe event that leads to understanding and support from the surrounding environment. Even though divorce rates are increasing in all generations, long-term romantic relationship is still recognised as an important institution, and this affects how losses are perceived. This being said, various studies reviewed here testify to individuals and groups struggling with having their grief recognised. This is actualised both in relation to family, the extended network, and the social system.

Spaten et al. (2011) argues that men's reactions of anger after losing a partner might have 'resulted in a rage that potentially disconnected them from others who may have been able to offer comfort and support'. This confirms Walter's (1999) suggestion that the clinical lore within grief research is centred around the normative assumption that 'it is good to talk', which might undermine alternative ways of coping. Taylor and Robinson (2016) accentuate humour as an important coping mechanism for the young widows and widowers. In Holst-Warhaft's (2000) historical reading of grief-rituals, tremendous sorrow has often turned into its total opposite. As we have seen, the idea of temporary respite as a necessary moment in the grief process has been promoted by Fasse and Zech (2016). Support is, therefore, considered broader than merely emotional comfort—and much appreciation is expressed for friends who manage to use humour both directly regarding the loss and to aspects not related to it (Taylor and Robinson 2016).

The young widows in Lowe and McClement (2011) experience support groups as being alienating due to the fact that the great majority of the other members are of an older generation. In O'Brien et al. (2002), several men doubt the effects of support groups and choose not to participate—grief is seen either as a personal thing or they 'didn't need a support group'. On the other hand, the need to mirror the grief in others within the same group is expressed by older widows in Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000). The strength of these bonds comes from a common feeling that nobody else 'really understands' what the bereaved is going through, and that support from others in a similar situation acquires extra value.

Three of the studies examine experiences of bereaved homosexual individuals (Bent and Magilvy 2006; Jenkins et al. 2014; O'Brien et al. 2002) where the concept of disenfranchised grief plays a prominent role. Being in contact with funeral and health services as well as dealing with administrative issues following the death of their same-sex partner were experienced as discriminating by lesbian widows in both Jenkins et al. (2014) and Bent and Magilvy (2006). Rights and privileges that naturally would have been granted the bereaved in traditional heterosexual relationships were overruled. Respondents 'described how they experienced anger and sadness at not having the relationship recognised, at not being able to spend time with the loved one in her final hours, at being denied access to financial resources they

shared, and at not finding the support they had hoped for from family and friends.’(Jenkins et al. 2014, p. 282).

Bereavement, conceptualised as the survivors’ common struggle to write the biography of the deceased (Walter 1996), can be made problematic for several reasons. Not only are many of the acquaintances of the deceased unaware of each other; they might also disagree on who the deceased ‘really was’. Some of the gay men in O’Brien et al. (2002) experienced being left out of the story by a family that did not acknowledge the sexual orientation of their lost son. The stigma still surrounding AIDS was likewise seen by several of the men as a factor contributing to a negative valence surrounding their partners’ death.

Discussion

Grief is played out on the borderline between existential universality and cultural specificity (Brinkmann 2018b). That death happens to each of us does not alter the fact that this is understood in radically different ways across time and place (Ariès 2008). Grief has a complex and paradoxical nature that is not diminished in the reviewed articles. That intense sadness and longing do not exclude moments of respite, or personal growth is one example of this.

The methodology in the reviewed qualitative studies testifies to a certain degree to both individual and cultural sensitivity. The groups investigated are, in most cases, a small number of same-sex people of a relatively homogeneous population. Except for one study of bereaved Chinese men, all studies are from either Western Europe, Australia, or Northern America. At the same time as this limits any possibility of drawing general conclusions, it should make possible some cautious suggestions regarding how grief after partner loss is experienced and understood in Western societies. The outlined frameworks figure in no small degree in the reviewed studies and can be seen as representative regarding how bereavement after partner loss is understood within the field of qualitative studies today. That being said, generalizing within qualitative studies is a controversial issue (Roald et al. accepted/in press), and should not shadow the specifics and singularities of experiences nor the knowledge gained from particular relationships. The generalizations drawn in the included studies as well as in this literature review is a necessary evil that only to a limited extent manage to capture the complex reality of bereavement.

Establishing and maintaining a continuing bond to the deceased was of vital importance for people of different ages, sex, and cultural heritage. This finding confirms the point that grief is not overcome, but something one may learn to live with and that a vital part of bereavement today consists of integrating the dead among the living. Moving on was not seen as involving ‘overcoming’ the loss in the sense of forgetting or breaking the bond. A partner’s death confronts us with an existential challenge of re-negotiating our hitherto existential worldview and constructing meaning out of the loss is suggested to be a driving force in the endeavour. According to DPM, this process proceeds through an oscillation between loss- and restoration-oriented positions. The studies reviewed here testify that bereaved people cannot easily distinguish these processes that tend to occur simultaneously. How grief is seen as a source of personal growth is accentuated via the concept of posttraumatic growth and several groups experienced disenfranchised grief in various ways.

In the following sections, I will raise a few critical questions and point out some issues that could deserve further attention on the background of these results. I will begin by analysing how the included frameworks are shaped by broader sociocultural tendencies, continue with a

discussion about how the ‘culture of happiness’ is affecting the experiences and interpretations of bereavement, and ask if the art of late modern love relationships should be made more explicit when trying to understand grief. Before concluding, I consider the potential consequences of understanding grief in a diagnostic language. I would like to emphasize that the discussion of the theoretical frameworks is not exclusively connected to partner bereavement, as these are likewise applied on other types of losses. The following discussion on modern love life relates more directly to this group.

A Case for the Hopeless?

Grief research is, like every other scientific discipline, not a merely descriptive enterprise but one that reflects broader cultural and political tendencies and interests (Habermas 1972). One might ask in what way the theoretical frameworks presented in this review reflect broader tendencies in Western society. Several writers (Walter 1999; Stroebe et al. 1992; Valentine 2006) have pointed out that the line between a modernist and a postmodernist understanding of grief plays a major role within the field of bereavement studies. While modernist theories perceived grief as a state that were limited in time and overcome through detachment or resolution, postmodern theories have a higher degree of acceptance for the complexity that grief encompasses. My reading will point out that—as indicated by many of these writers as well, “there is no rigid dividing line between modernist and postmodernist thinking” (Valentine 2006, p. 58). Importantly, I identify this blurring not only in the results of the reviewed empirical studies but in the fundamentals of the theories and frameworks applied. Since these theories often function as a lens through which the grief experiences are understood, they play an important role in the way grief is understood today. In the following, I will suggest a number of ways in which these theories remain bound to sociocultural tendencies that often work counter to their acclaimed missions. Even though this format does not allow for extensive discussion, they certainly demand attention elsewhere.

According to the most widely used framework, the continuing bonds, inter-subjectivity is broadly mediated and does not pre-suppose the living presence of the other. Even though the original theory did not regard the bond as something that was always present or as an antidote to loss (Klass et al. 1996; Klass 2006), I ask whether the obstinate insistence on the importance of continuing the bond in the review’s articles serves the interest of not accepting the utmost fact of mortality that the lost partner is indeed lost. In phenomenological terms, human relationships have two poles of intentionality, which the continuing bond lacks. My image of the lost loved one remains my image, and the otherness of the deceased is thereby paradoxically reduced even though he or she is dead. Following Brinkmann (2018c), one could argue that the ontological aspects of bereavement, that is, the fact that the other is no more, has been neglected through a one-sided focus on the psychological reactions among the bereaved. In the words of Kierkegaard (2009), the deceased is a ‘silent man’, and the fact that the continued bond will be partly shaped by a projection of the other should not be overlooked. Without neglecting the fact that many people experience a continued relationship, it is worth asking in what narratives bereaved people place these relations, what ontological status they ascribe to the deceased, and finally their reasons for doing so (Klass and Steffen 2018).

Regarding meaning construction, one could raise the question whether the weight given to functional narratives and meaning construction is a consequence of a contemporary inability to bear the meaningless and other aspects of life that somehow break the continuity and do not easily integrate into this coherence? In the words of Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000), the task of

‘moving forward and continue to live’ is conditioned by ‘a need to make sense of it all’ (p. 424). Explaining death is indeed a demanding enterprise, and it could be argued that the felt imperative to ‘create meaning’ that figures in many of the reviewed studies is seen as an individualised reduction of an inherently existential and social concept. Even though meaning and narrative coherence are achieved through talking with others, there are reasons to be sceptical that finding a plausible cause of the event, inscribing it into one’s life narrative, and finding positive aspects of bereavement should be sufficient to make the death of a partner ‘meaningful’.

Meaningful experience presupposes sociality, and losing a partner is, as we have seen, a loss of this other pool of meaning. Contemporary discourses of meaning that are having significant influence within grief research tend to view meaning as something individuals create when needed. Both in a sociological and phenomenological perspective, this individualisation of the concept is implausible. Meaning is not created *ex nihilo* but experienced within a lifeworld that transcends the individual and is shaped by the relations that make up an individual’s social world (Heidegger 2013; Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012). According to Norbert Elias (1982/2010), criticising the individual focus of the existential philosophical tradition, the world of the atomic subject is indeed meaningless and absurd due to this very lack of relations. The bereaved is in a situation where she experiences herself as fundamentally alone, and the world, therefore, discloses itself as meaningless (Attig 2010). In this perspective, the only way of giving meaning to the situation would be to bring the dead back to life. This being impossible, the question arises whether acceptance of meaninglessness becomes just as important a task as meaning creation. The ‘struggle’ of bereavement and the individual confusion regarding whether this process takes place within the limits of normality would perhaps be relieved if demands on meaning-making were less prominent. Death remains, a ‘pure question mark’ (Levinas 2000, p. 14), ‘the ultimate humiliation of human reason’ (Bauman 2003, p.15). The fact that the other—perhaps the one that I loved the most, has died, is not easily understood, and the question whether that is not all for the best is worth asking. At the very least, unreserved demands on meaning-making should not be seen as universally helpful for the bereaved person.

On the surface of it, DPM does make a place for a multifaceted and pending grief process and does indeed have a less normative string than earlier task and stage models (Stroebe and Schut 2010). The oscillation between loss and restoration is highly dependent on the social context, with public areas often implying a prohibition against intense sadness and thereby stimulating the restoration mode. Loss is restricted to the life scene played out ‘backstage’ (Goffman 2008). Even though the DPM is presented as both descriptive and able to capture a broader range of grief reactions, it is clear that a maladaptive grief reaction is the one being non-flexible and not adjustable (Valentine 2006, p. 62). It could certainly be asked whether these demands are not also in line with an increasing late modern focus on flexibility and adaptivity (Sennett 1998; Petersen 2016). Counter to the position that grief is—and should be—adjusted to the present context with regard to the potential personal and social consequences of doing it ‘wrong’, it could be argued that there are fundamental limits regarding how smooth the ‘fit’ with the rules of the living can become (Becker 2014).

While DPM makes it clear that a successful grief process make possible an adjustment to the present environment, it could be argued that grief—as a reminder of the otherness of death, cannot be adjusted nor restricted to the required smoothness and lack of negativity of late modern society. Kofod’s (2020) argues, drawing on a longitudinal interview study with bereaved parents that they often find themselves in the position of the ‘killjoy’. Being bereaved

amounts to being unable to play the game of happiness and a critical argument against the flexibility demanded by DPM would emphasize that grief makes appropriateness exceedingly difficult. Indeed, to find a proper place in the social world without the lost person is an urgent task for the bereaved, but it is not given that adjustment to any given society and its governing norms is the proper solution. The question whether the position of the bereaved is not paramount for any society and worthy of preservation is worth posing. In his expanded social ontology, Ruin (2018) writes that the answers given to the questions how we relate to the dead and which deaths we perceive as 'grievable' (Butler, 2009) or not 'will structure the material and intellectual landscape of the living, not only in terms of their archives, memorials and graveyards but also in their rituals and means of learning and ultimately in the shaping of their political communities' (p. 199). The flexibility aspired by DPM answers to broader feature our age, and should be perceived in this light. Walter (1999) likewise argues that the results of the DPM are highly compatible, not only with 'a general distancing from unpleasant emotion' but 'it also fits the power of positive thinking' (p. 161). The question, then, is whether the lack of flexibility that colours bereavement is a trait worth preserving? Is there a place for the killjoy today?

A Culture of Happiness

I have suggested that continuing bonds, meaning construction, and DPM reflect, in different ways and degrees, contemporary difficulties dealing with negativity, and the question now arises whether this is not even more obviously seen in relation to post-traumatic growth. One could ask whether the popularity of this theory can be seen as an expression of an individualistic and perhaps even self-centred culture that primarily perceive human relationships in an instrumental light? The 'struggle' metaphor that I have mentioned on several occasions suggests that grieving is something that can be conquered and won. Grief is functional via the overcoming of the crisis it exposes the bereaved to, and thereby reduced to a source of personal growth and self-development.

The fact that some people handle traumas and crisis constructively does not imply that this should be turned into an imperative for the bereaved. Critics have pointed out how discourses within cancer and AIDS societies have come to perceive the disease as a 'gift' that should be utilized most effectively (Cederström and Spicer 2015; Ehrenreich 2010). Since grief differs from these diseases through its social and ethical aspects, it could be argued that this development is even more suspicious within the world of bereavement. In grieving, we praise a life once shared, and how this is done is one of the most intimate and personal matters we can imagine. The explicit or implicit demands that this experience should necessarily be instrumentalised in *any* way is potentially problematic.

The disadvantage of a high cultural sensitivity could be that the existential core of losing a loved one becomes diminished. Grief research focusing on the specific experience of sub-groups and persons does capture vital aspects of bereavement but, at the same time, tends to overshadow more basic questions. It could be worth asking whether contemporary grief research with its high degree of specificity is losing sight of more basic existential issues. The perspectives outlined in this review share the characteristics of being more or less constructive answers or reactions to the loss. In this light, what happened to the loss itself? In his book *A Grief Observed* (1961), following the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis (1961) makes this point in the following way: 'It is hard to have patience with people who say 'There is no death' or 'Death doesn't matter'. There is death. And whatever happens has

consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible' (p. 15). Descriptions of how the dead partner has left an irresolvable wound that cannot be healed do figure in the reviewed articles but tend to be overshadowed by a constructive focus on how the process of moving on is best tackled.

There is death, and one could argue that the perspectives outlined in this review—despite their explicit attempts of overcoming earlier stage phase and task models have a 'positive aura' around them. They often presuppose a more or less autonomous individual willing and capable of overcoming the struggle that grief confronts them with. Grief, in this view, requires an effort to get back on track and continue life more or less exempt of suffering. This does not imply that suffering is left totally out of the picture, but it does indicate that the irreversible and impossible aspects of bereavement are somewhat neglected. Hopelessness is seemingly forbidden territory in contemporary qualitative grief research.

Asking whether this reflects broader aspects of a Western society that fashions happiness, effectiveness, and agility is, indeed, a question worth investigating. Several critics have suggested that personal and social spaces earlier devoted to negativity have been evaded with a constant focus on showing a positive face and being optimistic about the possibilities in life (Bruckner 2011; Cederström and Spicer 2015; Davies 2016). Since grief is an inherently normative phenomenon (Kofod and Brinkmann 2017), the suggestion that this cultural climate affects both the experiences and the interpretations thereof among bereaved people today demands further studies. Is there at all room for aspects not conforming to a happiness paradigm today, and how does this relate to grief?

Diagnostisation and Late Modern Love

Another issue worth drawing attention to in this context—not unrelated to the former discussion, is the ongoing implementation of prolonged grief disorder in ICD-11. Despite the fact that both the issue of diagnosing grief as such and the specificities of the diagnostic criteria in particular has been intensively discussed during the previous decades (Horowitz et al. 2009; Prigerson et al. 2009; Wakefield 2012), none of the studies mentioned this poignant issue. The fact that receiving a psychiatric diagnosis profoundly affects people (Hayne 2003) calls for studies examining the implication of the fact that prolonged grief is now becoming pathologised. According to Granek (2010), "grief has been constructed as a pathological condition necessitating psychological intervention for people to heal as quickly as possible" (p. 46). A continuation of this process can be seen in the ICD-11, where grief is seen as potentially pathological if longing and preoccupation with the deceased, together with intense psychological distress, is still present after 6 months following the death of a person close to the bereaved (Brinkmann 2018a).

The long and intense discussion on how the diagnostic criteria should be formulated testifies to how controversial the pathologisation of grief is. Even though both the bereaved and organisations trying to speak their voice are positive with regard to the diagnosis because it provides an opportunity for recognition and treatment, knowing that there are objective limits to what 'normal grief' consists of will most likely affect how people relate to their loss (Kofod and Brinkmann 2017). On the one hand, an urge to 'be done' with grieving after half a year will be a likely response to the diagnosis. On the other hand, pathologising itself can be utilised in the name of love. That is, a prolonged and potentially 'never-ending' grief process can be seen as an effective way of stating one's sorrow to the surrounding world. The diagnosis thereby functions as a confirmation that one's grief is 'real' and their pain worthy of

recognition. This being mere speculation, future studies should consider how diagnostic language affects people and their understandings of grief.

Before concluding, I would like to pinpoint how the questions of how contemporary culture is shaped by a form of ‘happiness imperative’ border on the question of how romantic relationships are lived in late modern society. While it is often said that grief is the flipside of love, the conditions for contemporary love life is seldom explicitly paid attention to within the reviewed studies nor grief research in general. As pointed out in the introduction, marriage, and partnership have gone through massive transformations in the course of the last decades, and it would indeed be surprising if this did not affect bereavement and the adjustment to the world without a former life partner.

That our love life to a large degree is shaped by the cultural climate is not a revolutionary claim. That the serial monogamy of the contemporary West has resulted in increased divorce rates and a radically changed view on the function of love relationships has likewise been claimed for a long time. Late modern love relationships are, to a large degree, based on ‘free choice’, with both sexes being independent regarding how the relationship proceeds (Illouz 2012). Could it be that the way we engage in romantic relationships has excluded a part of love that was earlier seen as vital for a longstanding relationship, for example an ability to endure periods that do not qualify as decidedly happy, and the fact that our needs and wants in reality could be more effectively satisfied elsewhere (Giddens 1992)? The ‘marriage market’, to a high degree, places demands on partners to live up to expectations ‘negotiated’ beforehand, and many people move in and out of love relationships with great haste (Badiou 2012).

Contrasting this line of thought, Smart (2007) and others have pointed out that claims depicting the steady decline of family life and eruption on relationships based on commitment in general is hastened. Empirical studies on how adults deal with the loss of a partner could indeed bring new knowledge in this domain. Losing a life happens—with few exceptions, against one’s will. How bereaved partners navigate in the normative minefield of questions that surround it, when and how to find a new partner would indeed be worth pursuing, can grief tell us anything about love, and how does it position itself in relation to an overreaching ‘emotional capitalism’ (Illouz 2007)? Does this readiness of a potential leave and non-expectancy of lasting love make bereavement easier, or does it complicate the question of guilt to a further degree? Can the grief provide further knowledge with regard to the expectations that govern partnership today? And can the continuing bonds paradigm be seen as a way of perceiving grief as a more integrated part of loving? At an even more fundamental level, one might ask how the perspective of the bereaved can give access to some of the more existential aspects of partnership. If there is any truth to the folk wisdom that we only know the value of something by the time it is lost, bereaved partners could indeed make an interesting case for studying partnership as such.

Conclusion

In this review, I have sought to examine the field of qualitative studies on partner loss in the previous two decades. In the bulk of this article, I describe the ways five prominent frameworks are applied in 18 qualitative studies. Continuing bonds, narrative meaning construction, the two-track model of bereavement, post-traumatic growth, and disenfranchised grief make up the theoretical landscape in the field of qualitative studies

on partner bereavement today. I outline the basic features of these frameworks and how they are applied in the included studies. In the following discussion, I ponder on how particular sociocultural conditions shape both the art of love relationships, the experiences of bereavement as well as the interpretations and theories that are seen as compatible with these. Drawing on a broad range of sociological and phenomenological theories, I question several aspects herein. First, I suggest several ‘blind spots’ when it comes to how the theory of continuing bonds, narrative meaning construction and DPM remain bound to a culture that have exceedingly difficulties with handling suffering. While I respond to several unique features in the mentioned frameworks, the general issue identified is a tendency of avoiding or suppressing negativity and the relentless suffering that grief comprises. Despite their explicit attempts to part with modernistic notions of letting-go and working through, these frameworks remain partly solution-based. This tendency is even more widespread among the proponents of post-traumatic growth that I argue testify to a clear-cut example of a “culture of happiness” which has contributed to an instrumentalisation of human relationships and made happiness, enjoyment, and subjective wellbeing the ultimate goal in life. Furthermore, I pinpoint how the reviewed studies do not consider the question of whether grief is to be perceived and treated in a diagnostic light, something that is urgent in a time where prolonged grief-disorder figures as a separate diagnosis in ICD-11. I finally suggest that this—together with a greater awareness to the sociocultural predicaments of love and partnership, should guide future qualitative studies of partner bereavement.

Funding Information This work was supported by The Obel Family Foundation under Grant no. 28153

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

- Archer, J. (2008). Theories of grief: past, present, and future perspectives. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, & W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention* (pp. 45–65). American Psychological Association.
- Ariès, P. (2008). *The hour of our death: the classic history of western attitudes toward death over the last one thousand years*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Attig, T. (2004). Disenfranchised grief revisited: discounting hope and love. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 49(3), 197–215.
- Attig, T. (2010). *How we grieve, relearning the world* (2. revised ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Badiou, A. (2012). *In praise of love*. New Press.
- Badiou, A. (2016). *Happiness*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Balk, D. E. (2004). Recovery following bereavement: an examination of the concept. *Death Studies*, 28(4), 361–374.
- Bauman, Z. (2013). *Mortality, immortality and other life strategies*. Oxford: Wiley.
- Becker, E. (2014). *The denial of death*. New York: Souvenir Press.
- Bennett, G., & Bennett, K. M. (2000). The presence of the dead: An empirical study. *Mortality*, 5(2), 139–157.
- Bennett, K. M., & Vidal-Hall, S. (2000). Narratives of death: a qualitative study of widowhood in later life. *Ageing and Society*, 20(4), 413–428.
- Bent, K. N., & Magilvy, J. K. (2006). When a partner dies: lesbian widows. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 27(5), 447–459.
- Brinkmann, S. (2016). *Diagnostic cultures: a cultural approach to the pathologization of modern life*. Routledge.
- Brinkmann, S. (2018a). Could grief be a mental disorder? *Nordic Psychology*, 70(2), 146–159.

- Brinkmann, S. (2018b). The grieving animal: grief as a foundational emotion. *Theory & Psychology*, 28(2), 193–207.
- Brinkmann, S. (2018c). General psychological implications of the human capacity for grief. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, 52(2), 177–190.
- Brinkmann, S., & Kofod, E. H. (2018). Grief as an extended emotion. *Culture & Psychology*, 24(2), 160–173.
- Bruckner, P. (2011). *Perpetual Euphoria: on the duty to be happy*. Princeton University Press.
- Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* London: Verso.
- Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (2006). *Handbook of posttraumatic growth, research and practice*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum associates.
- Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2015). *The wellness syndrome*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Chan, W. C. H., & Chan, C. L. W. (2011). Acceptance of spousal death: the factor of time in bereaved older adults' search for meaning. *Death Studies*, 35(2), 147–162.
- Daggett, L. M. (2002). Living with loss: middle-aged men face spousal bereavement. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(5), 625–639.
- Danforth, M. M., & Glass Jr., J. C. (2001). Listen to my words, give meaning to my sorrow: a study in cognitive constructs in middle-age bereaved widows. *Death Studies*, 25(6), 513–529.
- Davies, W. J. (2016). *The happiness industry: how the government and big business sold us well-being*. London: Verso.
- Davis, C. G., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (2001). Loss and meaning: how do people make sense of loss? *The American Behavioral Scientist; Thousand Oaks*, 44(5), 726–741.
- Doka, K. J. (1989). *Disenfranchised grief*. Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Doka, K. J. (1999). Disenfranchised grief. *Bereavement Care*, 18(3), 37–39.
- Doka, K. J. (2002). *Disenfranchised grief: new directions, challenges, and strategies for practice* (1st ed.). Champaign: Research Press.
- Dyregrov, A. (1990). Parental reactions to the loss of an infant child: a review. *Scand J Psychol Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 31(4), 266–280.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2010). *Smile or die, how positive thinking fooled America and the world*. London: Granta Books.
- Elias, N. (1982/2010). *The loneliness of the dying*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Fasse, L., & Zech, E. (2016). Dual process model of coping with bereavement in the test of the subjective experiences of bereaved spouses: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 74(2), 212–238.
- Field, N. P., Nichols, C., Holen, A., & Horowitz, M. J. (1999). The relation of continuing attachment to adjustment in conjugal bereavement. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 67(2), 212–218.
- Freud, S. (2005). *On murder, mourning and melancholia*. London: Penguin Books.
- Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford University Press.
- Gillies, J., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2006). Loss, grief, and the search for significance: toward a model of meaning reconstruction in bereavement. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 19(1), 31–65.
- Goffman, E. (2008). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Granek, L. (2010). Grief as pathology: The evolution of grief theory in psychology from Freud to the present. *History of Psychology*, 13(1), 46–73.
- Haase, T. J., & Johnston, N. (2012). Making meaning out of loss: a story and study of young widowhood. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 7(3), 204–221.
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Harrison, T., Kahn, D. L., & Hsu, M. (2005). A hermeneutic phenomenological study of widowhood for African-American women. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 50(2), 131–149.
- Hayne, Y. M. (2003). Experiencing psychiatric diagnosis: client perspectives on being named mentally ill. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 10(6), 722–729.
- Heidegger, M. (2013). *Being and time*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Hobson, C. J. (1964). Widows of Blackton. *New Society*, (104), 13–16.
- Holst-Warhaft, G. (2000). *The cue for passion, grief and its political uses*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Horowitz, M. J., Jacobs, S. C., Parkes, C. M., Aslan, M., Goodkin, K., Raphael, B., et al. (2009). Prolonged grief disorder: psychometric validation of criteria proposed for DSM-V and ICD-11., 6(8).
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies, the making of emotional capitalism*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Illouz, E. (2012). Why love hurts: A sociological explanation.
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (2014). *Shattered assumptions*. Free Press.
- Jenkins, C. L., Edmundson, A., Averett, P., & Yoon, I. (2014). Older lesbians and bereavement: experiencing the loss of a partner. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 57(2–4), 273–287.
- Jones, E., Oka, M., Clark, J., Gardner, H., Hunt, R., & Dutton, S. (2018). Lived experience of young widowed individuals: a qualitative study. *Death Studies*, 1–10.

- Kierkegaard. (2009). *Three discourses on imagined occasions*. Princeton University Press.
- Klass, D. (2006). *Death, grief, religion, and spirituality*. Amityville: Baywood Publishing Company.
- Klass, D., & Steffen, E. (2018). *Continuing bonds in bereavement: new directions for research and practice*. Routledge.
- Klass, D., Nickman, S. L., & Silverman, P. R. (1996). *Continuing bonds, new understandings of grief*. Washington, D.C: Taylor & Francis.
- Kofod, E. H. (2017). From morality to pathology: a brief historization of contemporary Western grief practices and understandings. *Nordic Psychology*, 69(1), 47–60.
- Kofod, E. H. (2020). The grieving killjoy: Bereavement, alienation and cultural critique. *Culture & Psychology* (accepted/in press).
- Kofod, E. H., & Brinkmann, S. (2017). Grief as a normative phenomenon: the diffuse and ambivalent normativity of infant loss and parental grieving in contemporary Western culture. *Culture & Psychology*, 23(4), 519–533.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1973). *On death and dying*. Routledge Ltd.
- Levinas. (2000). *God, death and time*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lewis, C. S. (1961). *A grief observed*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Lopez, S. J., & Snyder, C. R. (2002). *Handbook of positive psychology*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lowe, M. E., & McClement, S. E. (2011). Spousal bereavement: the lived experience of young Canadian widows. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 62(2), 127–148.
- Marris, P. (1958). *Widows and their families*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945/2012). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge.
- O'Brien, J. M., Forrest, L. M., & Austin, A. E. (2002). Death of a partner: perspectives of heterosexual and gay men. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 7(3), 317–328.
- Parkes, C. M. (1970). The first year of bereavement. A longitudinal study of the reaction of London widows to the death of their husbands. *Psychiatry*, 33(4), 444–467.
- Petersen, A. (2016). *Præstationssamfundet*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- Prigerson, H. G., Horowitz, M. J., Jacobs, S. C., Parkes, C. M., Aslan, M., Goodkin, K., Maciejewski, P. K. (2009). Prolonged grief disorder: psychometric validation of criteria proposed for DSM-V and ICD-11.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2018). In G. Stanghellini, M. Broome, A. Raballo, A. V. Fernandez, P. Fusar-Poli, & R. Rosfort (Eds.), *The Phenomenological Clarification of Grief and its Relevance for Psychiatry* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Richardson, T. (2014). Spousal bereavement in later life: a material culture perspective. *Mortality*, 19(1), 61–79.
- Roald, T., Koppé, S., Bechman Jensen, T., Moeskjær Hansen, J., & Levin, K. (Accepted/In press). Why do we always generalize in qualitative methods? *Qualitative Psychology*.
- Rodger, M. L., Sherwood, P., O'Connor, M., & Leslie, G. (2007). Living beyond the unanticipated sudden death of a partner: a phenomenological study. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 54(2), 107–133.
- Rosenblatt, P. C. (2007). Recovery following bereavement: metaphor, phenomenology, and culture. *Death Studies*, 32(1), 6–16.
- Rubin, S. (1984). Mourning distinct from melancholia: the resolution of bereavement. *The British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 57, 339–345.
- Ruin, H. (2018). *Being with the dead – burial, ancestral politics and the roots of historical consciousness*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness, using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for deep fulfillment*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
- Sennett, R. (1998). *The corrosion of character, the personal consequences of work in the new*. Capitalism: Norton.
- Smart, C. (2007). *Personal life: new directions in sociological thinking*. Polity Press.
- Spaten, M. O., Nørremark Byrialsen, M., & Langdridge, D. (2011). Men's grief, meaning and growth: a phenomenological investigation into the experience of loss. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 11(2), 1–15.
- Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: rationale and description. *Death Studies*, 23(3), 197–224.
- Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (2010). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: a decade on. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 61(4), 273–289.
- Stroebe, M., Gergen, M. M., Gergen, K. J., & Stroebe, W. (1992). Broken hearts or broken bonds: love and death in historical perspective. *American Psychologist*, 47(10), 1205–1212.
- Taylor, N. C., & Robinson, W. D. (2016). The lived experience of young widows and widowers. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 44(2), 67–79.
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2007). Beyond the concept of recovery: growth and the experience of loss. *Death Studies*, 32(1), 27–39.

- The Culture of Grief (n.d.) Project description: https://www.kommunikation.aau.dk/digitalAssets/268/268233_the-culture-of-grief.pdf. Accessed 3 Jan 2020.
- Valentine, C. (2006). Academic constructions of bereavement. *Mortality*, 11(1).
- Valentine, C. (2008). *Bereavement narratives, continuing bonds in the twenty-first century*. New York: Routledge.
- Wakefield, C. (2012). Should prolonged grief be reclassified as a mental disorder in DSM-5?: reconsidering the empirical and conceptual arguments for complicated grief disorder. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 200(6), 499–511.
- Walter, T. (1996). A new model of grief: bereavement and biography. *Mortality*, 1(1), 7–25.
- Walter, T. (1999). *On bereavement, the culture of grief*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Walter, T. (2017). *What death means now, thinking critically about dying and grieving*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Wortman, C. B., & Silver, R. C. (1989). The myths of coping with loss. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology*, 57(3), 349–357.
- Yalom, I., & Lieberman, M. A. (1991). Bereavement and heightened existential awareness. *Psychiatry*, 54(4), 334–345.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.