



available at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)



journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/scaman>



# Beyond letting go and moving on: New perspectives on organizational death, loss and grief

Emma Bell\*, Scott Taylor

University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4ST, United Kingdom

## KEYWORDS

Organization;  
Death;  
Grief;  
Loss;  
Change;  
Resistance;  
Closure;  
Downsizing;  
Restructuring

**Summary** Understandings of organizational death, a term used to describe events including downsizing, site closure and business failure, are dominated by psychological stage models that promote letting go as a solution to collective loss. This approach neglects the empirical and conceptual shift which has transformed understandings of bereavement at the individual level through the theory of continuing bonds. This is the consequence of: (i) a *managerialist* focus on grief as a problem to be solved; (ii) a *cultural* orientation that constructs relationships between life and death, self and others, positive and negative emotions in dualistic terms and; (iii) an *empirical* emphasis on North American organizations. We conclude by suggesting how a continuing bonds perspective could enhance understandings of organizational death as a cultural phenomenon that is fundamental to the construction of meaning.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

While the literature on organizational change is largely silent concerning issues of loss and grief, those studies that have addressed these dynamics suggest they can be understood as instances of organizational death (Blau, 2006, 2007, 2008; Harris & Sutton, 1986; Hazen, 2008; Marks & Mirvis, 2001; Marris, 1974; Sutton, 1983, 1987; Zell, 2003). However, conceptualization of organizational death is complicated by the fact that scholars have used it to refer to a wide range of organizational change events, including site closure, business or project failure, downsizing, restructuring, mergers and acquisitions. Within this literature, the concept of organizational death is applied in ways that are both inductive, based on the lived experiences of organization members who account for events in these terms (Milligan, 2003;

Sutton, 1983, 1987; Zell, 2003), and deductive, measuring organizational member responses to such events by developing and testing theoretical models of the grieving process (Blau, 2006, 2007, 2008).

While care must be taken in generalizing findings from studies of individual bereavement to organizational contexts, many of these scholars have argued that the reactions of loss and grief that such collective situations provoke are broadly similar to those associated with the death of an individual person. Theories of individual bereavement have thereby acquired the potential to inform understandings of loss and grief at the collective level. These scholars draw extensively on psychological stage models of grief which promote letting go and moving on as a solution to the loss, a way of managing and minimizing the intense emotions associated with grief. In this article we explore the limitations associated with this perspective which, we suggest, restricts the potential for management studies to appreciate the significance of organizational death as a cultural phenomenon that is fundamental to the construction of work-related meaning.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1392 264492.

E-mail address: [emma.bell@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:emma.bell@exeter.ac.uk) (E. Bell).

We begin by reviewing scholarship relating to individual bereavement and loss and considering the popularity of psychological stage theories in informing a late twentieth century view of grief as an orderly sequence of stages through which the individual must pass in succession. Next, we trace the fundamental empirical and conceptual shift that has occurred within scholarship on individual bereavement and loss in the past decade through the notion of continuing bonds, which asserts that the living can maintain relationships with the dead at emotional, social and material levels, sometimes long after death has occurred. This challenges the former orthodoxy that bereaved people need to detach from relationships with the dead in order to regain independence. We then consider why this shift in perspective that has transformed understandings of individual loss and grief has not had more significant impact on organizational death research. After demonstrating the ongoing dominance of stage theories in analyses of organizational death, we identify three limitations which help to explain why the notion of continuing bonds has not been more widely incorporated into management research. Finally, we consider the potential for alternative perspectives on loss and grief as a means of opening up new pathways for research and practice.

## Stage models of grief

The social scientific study of death and loss is a relatively nascent discipline (Benoliel, 1994). Within this interdisciplinary field scholars make a tripartite distinction between bereavement, grief and mourning (Charmaz & Milligan, 2008). Bereavement is defined as the survivor's status following a loss through death. It is accompanied by the expectation of grieving, a subjective emotional response to irretrievable loss that may be made manifest in mental, physical or social ways. Grief is expressed through individual or institutional practices of mourning.

Scholars in this field regard Sigmund Freud's (1917) article '*Mourning and Melancholia*' as highly significant in the discipline's formation (Howarth, 2007; Walter, 1996). Freud conceptualizes mourning as a functional process whereby emotional attachments to the deceased are severed so that the ego can become autonomous again and invest in new libidinal attachments. Normal mourning ends when the mourner reaches the objective conclusion that the lost object of attachment no longer exists. The subject must therefore neutralize the 'enduring pain of loss by accepting consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost' (Clewell, 2004, p. 48). For Freud, when separation from the deceased is avoided rather than accepted, the mourner suffers from melancholia, a pathological state in which the loss of a loved object is transformed into an obsessive, aggressive attack on the self.

Building on these ideas, Bowlby's (1961) theory of attachment established basic principles for the early study of bereavement. For Bowlby (1980), bereavement comprises four phases: numbness; yearning, searching and anger; disorganization and despair; and reorganization, each occurring successively and giving way to the next. Empirical support for this model was provided through Parkes' (1986) study of widows' reactions to the death of their husbands. Parkes argues that grief involves successive stages 'which blend into and replace one another ... numbness, the first stage, gives

place to pining, and pining to disorganization and despair, and it is only after the stage of disorganization that recovery occurs' (Parkes, 1986, p. 27).

Understandings of loss and grief have been greatly influenced by interpretations of Kübler-Ross' (1969) study of terminally ill patients' responses to their impending death. Kübler-Ross suggests five distinct phases through which the individual passes in coming to accept death: denial, the 'it can't be true' phase, followed by anger, the patient experiencing deep emotions such as resentment and frustration which may be directed towards other persons; then a bargaining stage, during which the individual acknowledges the seriousness of their condition but tries to negotiate for more time in which to undertake desired activities or complete unfinished business. This is followed by the depressive stage, when the patient mourns what has already been lost, such as physical mobility, and anticipates future losses. Finally, the dying person reaches the stage of acceptance in which they accept the inevitability of their death and prepare for it, and in so doing achieves a sense of inner and outer tranquillity.

These stage models of loss have been widely accepted by clinicians and therapists and applied in a broad range of everyday situations such as the loss of a close relationship through divorce. Through their popularization, these psychological theories are transmuted into a fixed sequence which it is assumed the individual must pass through in order to recover (Walter, 1999). This helped to establish an understanding of grief as a pre-programmed series of behaviours (Silverman and Klass, 1996) which dictates that grieving commences at the moment of attachment or disorientation and concludes with acceptance or accommodation. It is recommended that normal passage through the stages involved in making sense of a grief event should not extend beyond 24 months after the loss (Maciejewski Zhang, Block, & Prigerson, 2007). Stage models are commonly used to 'assist' the bereaved to 'progress', based on the assumption that grief entails effort or work. They thereby encourage mastery of loss and suggest that the individual must ultimately resolve it by letting go. The final stage involves the survivor severing psychological bonds with the deceased so they can form new relationships. Recovery can only occur when a mourner is able to move on, this being proposed as a universally desirable outcome. Deviation from this pattern is defined as disordered or dysfunctional, requiring therapeutic intervention to deal with unresolved, chronic or complicated grief reactions (Jacobs, 1993).

## Organizational death and loss

The concept of organizational death has been applied in studies of change through downsizing, merger and acquisition, leadership, site closure, and project or organizational failure. In an early contribution to this literature, Marris (1974) suggests the concept of grief can be applied to many organizational change situations, from individual loss of employment to corporate reorganization. He argues that grief must be 'worked out, from shock through acute distress to reintegration. If the bereaved cannot work through this process of grieving, they may suffer lasting emotional damage' (Marris, 1974, p. 27). This psychological process of adjustment relies on disentangling the dead from the lives of the living, to enable the bereaved to become re-estab-

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات